

# SOLIDARITY

## Chapter Nine

### The Second World War

Leaders of the ITF had anticipated the German invasion of the Netherlands and had taken the precaution of moving the organisation's headquarters to London. As the prospect of war became inevitable, Fimmen made sure that all ITF affiliates knew where the federation stood. He wrote in the July 1939 issue of *Fascism*: 'If hostilities should break out, if Hitler should unleash a war, we shall do our part in the defence against the Fascist attack and to overcome the aggressors, to prevent the subjugation of the home country and the destruction of our workers' movement. If a war proves inevitable, we shall take up arms, not for love of our own rulers, but for love of our own class, and of our own country, which we desire to make a real home for all those who work.'

The prose was true to Fimmen's style. He had dominated the affairs of the ITF in the inter-war years. He remained an idealist despite the experience of the failure to resist the spread of fascism. He was also dedicated to the ITF. Persuaded to put down his own memories for the period in 1939, he chose to recall an incident from Austria in 1919 when many were facing starvation at the end of the First

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Crossland Fosse in Bedfordshire, England which was the provisional headquarters of the ITF from November 1939 to July 1945.

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World War. 'It was early December 1919. The Austrian trade unions were holding their first congress after the war. In connection with congress a "banquet" took place. This consisted of a plain soup, a thin slice of pork (one of the farm workers' branches had presented the congress with a pig), a small portion of white cabbage and a piece of war bread. I had, as we were wont to do in the "richer" countries, toyed with the bread during the meal, rolling it into balls, etc. Suddenly Hüber, the general secretary, beside whom I sat as guest of honour, asked me if I intended to eat any more of the bread. When I said no, he asked whether he could have it, and when, slightly surprised, I replied in the affirmative, he produced a sheet of paper from his pocket and proceeded to wrap the bits of bread in it, remarking: "I'm taking that home for my boy." It was perhaps the most painful and poignant moment I have ever experienced: a distinguished friend and colleague, who begged for his hungry son a slice of bread which in our home would have gone into the pigs' trough.'

He was also emotional. Jaap Oldenbroek, who succeeded him on his death in 1942, talked of a moment following the move to London. 'He could be exuberant in his joy as well as his sorrows. I recall that at the first meeting of the British management committee of the ITF, held in November 1939, shortly after the headquarters was transferred to England, he was unable to restrain his tears when Ernest Bevin, John Marchbank and W.R. Spence solemnly pledged all the support that might be needed to keep the International alive.'

The ability of the ITF to maintain its contacts within Germany during the rise of Hitler meant it had many people well-placed to provide useful information on the

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movement of weapons and troops by road or rail. Seafarers were expert observers of marine installations and defences, particularly after the invasion of Holland, Belgium and Norway. However, there was sometimes an element of mutual distrust. Five ITF seafarers – Kurt and Werner Lehmann in Dunkirk and Theodor Haag, Helmut Bruhns and Harry Bahlke in Marseilles – were interned in France as enemy foreigners. They were regarded as Communists by the French Deuxième Bureau. ‘What can they have against us, what have we done?’ Kurt and Werner Lehmann asked in one of their letters. ‘Until the war we have fought against the Nazis, on the first day of the war we volunteered to join the French Army. Everybody knows that if we get caught we will be hanged in Germany and Russia.’

The risks involved did not prevent large numbers of trade unionists from responding to the calls for resistance and opposition to the Nazi regime. Hans Jahn’s network of railway workers was a conduit through which information filtered back to the allied cause. By early in 1940, Jahn had convinced the French of the possibility of sabotage and was promised as much money as he wanted for ‘travel costs, daily allowances and money to bribe’. It was not long before locomotives were derailed in increasing numbers and freight was sent to the wrong destination by the simple expedient of changing the direction notices on the wagons.

The call to sabotage was to be often repeated throughout the conflict. It had the desired effect. Hans Jahn, under the pseudonym of Fritz Krämer, reported in a speech in London in July 1943 that the subtle resistance of railway workers and the ever-present risk of damage to the

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network had meant that the Nazis had to patrol stations with 60,000 SS troops while 270,000 fit men of military age were kept from the front because reliable replacements could not be found.

As the allies advanced towards the end of the war, the appeals became more intense. On the eve of Europe's liberation, the ITF joined forces with the American broadcasting station in Europe to send out a joint signal two days after D-day on 6 June 1944. It was transmitted in a number of European languages and addressed all European transport workers, calling on them to take action. The ITF journal commented that the morale of the saboteurs was at its highest when they knew they were doing the work of paratroopers.

The success of the saboteurs led to all former trade unionists coming under suspicion in Germany. Hans Jahn estimated that 1.5m left-wing opponents of the Hitler regime had been through the hands of the Gestapo. 'I have before me a list of 72 death sentences which have been carried out' he said. 'Eight of my best comrades in the fight against Hitler have been murdered by the Gestapo. Only the future can reveal the immense number of victims who fell in the fight for liberty.'

Several of the former leaders of ITF-affiliated unions – such as Hermann Jochade, leader of the German railwaymen and secretary of the ITF from 1904-16, Ludvik Buland of the Norwegian Transport Workers' Union, Pierre Semard of the French Railwaymen's Federation, and E. Grzłowski of the Polish Railwaymen's Union – were shot by the Nazis or died as the result of their treatment in concentration camps.

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The invasion of Holland, Norway, France and Belgium provided a greater number of trade union exiles than just the ITF leaders who escaped to London. In particular, many seamen sailed their ships to allied harbours as soon as they heard news of the occupation of their own countries. When the German armies began to move, the ITF called merchant crews on the radio and urged them to take their ships to allied ports. The Norwegians, the largest group, were able to re-establish their own union in Britain with ITF help and even the general secretary managed to escape to London. The Danes, Belgians, Dutch, French and Poles formed a combined organisation, known as the BDDFP, which functioned throughout the war. Help was also available to Greek and Yugoslav seafarers and some from Sweden who had been cut off from their homes by the war.

Willy Dorchain, a ship's officer who became an ITF representative in New York late in 1943, was among those who escaped with his ship from Belgium. He spoke fluent Greek after serving aboard Greek vessels early in his career. He served at sea until 1942 when the ship on which he was serving was torpedoed on her way from the United States to Great Britain. Out of a crew of 50, there were only 20 survivors, and the latter, including Dorchain, spent 19 terrible days in an open lifeboat in icy weather before being rescued and being taken to Iceland. Many of those in the lifeboat suffered severely from frostbite and had to have limbs amputated as a result. Recovering well from the effects of exposure, Dorchain worked closely with the military authorities as a radio operator before finally coming ashore a year later.

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Edo Fimmen's health deteriorated from the end of 1939 and he often had to keep in touch from his home during long spells of illness. The management committee, made up of three British trade unionists, granted Fimmen leave of absence for 12 months in September 1942, in the hope that he could regain his health in the better climate of Mexico. Jaap Oldenbroek assumed the duties of the general secretary in Fimmen's absence and the work of the ITF was continued, including the publication of the new journal from January 1940 in English and Spanish. Publication of *Fascism* was also maintained in English and German. Fimmen's condition never improved sufficiently for him to return to England and he died of a stroke on 14 December 1942. The Mexican Confederation of Workers, which had invited Fimmen to recover in Mexico, mounted a guard of honour at his funeral in Mexico City. Two weeks after his death, Christmas food parcels sent by Fimmen to the ITF's staff arrived in London from Mexico.

His last letter, written to Charles Lindley in Sweden in September 1942, showed Fimmen to feel almost guilty at being away from Europe and its wartime conditions. 'Immediately on receipt of your letter, I got in touch with the Swedish representative here, to send you a parcel at the earliest opportunity. I may only send you one at a time. Well, I chose the best package available, containing coffee, tea, ham, dried fruit etc. As soon as it is on its way, I am allowed to mail another package, and shall of course do it, so that with every ship that sails from here for Sweden, from now onwards, you will get a parcel. This is a mad world indeed: you are sitting in Sweden with a good appetite and no food, I am sitting here with good food and no appetite.'

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Ellen Wilkinson, a British MP who was parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Home Security, commented in an issue of the ITF journal, dedicated to Fimmen's memory and printed shortly after his death: 'A great novel could be written of the struggle of the European workers in this century with Edo Fimmen as its hero. For his whole attitude to life was heroic. His magnificent voice and physique, his great heart, and organising genius were always at the service of the oppressed. He enthused dispirited men with his own superb courage. Yet how human he was. He never lost the individual in the mass. He took immense trouble over each sad case. Many times he evoked my help for refugees with an urgency that showed he felt the troubles of each unhappy soul as though they were the affairs of his own children.'

Fimmen's successor, Jaap Oldenbroek, came from a similar background in Amsterdam. He had also worked initially as a clerk and then for the Dutch trade union congress and, like his mentor, with whom he had worked for 20 years, was a confirmed socialist and a brilliant linguist. He had also been active in the 1930s in Nazi Germany. Adolph Kummernuss, of the Hamburg dockers, recalled later: 'I shall never forget the journey I undertook with Japie Oldenbroek in 1935, during the dark years of Nazi rule, from Hamburg to Berlin. We were organising illegal meetings in various parts of Germany. Hour by hour we risked our heads and the lives of our families. For me, as a German trade unionist, it was the only course of action. But that it was also a matter of course for the Dutchman, Oldenbroek, was a heartening lesson for me.'

Oldenbroek was an important link for both the British intelligence service and the Office of Strategic Services in



Jaap Oldenbroek, ITF General Secretary from 1942 to 1950, pictured here at the 1946 Oslo congress.



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the United States (a forerunner of the CIA). Information from German resistance leaders like Willy Brandt, later to be Chancellor of West Germany, was passed by ITF contacts to the allies. Trade unionists were also involved directly in both the collation of secret information and in acts of sabotage organised by the secret services.

Sweden was a well-known channel of communication, a connection exploited by the OSS as well as British intelligence. From the middle of 1943 the OSS had its own agent in Stockholm, working with the ITF to penetrate Germany and operate a ship observers' scheme. Contact with Germany was maintained by the master and entire crew of a German coastal vessel plying between Stockholm and Hamburg. The observation of enemy shipping was a key task and the OSS at one time had more than 1,000 seafarers ready to file reports.

Much of the collaboration between the ITF and the secret services was informal, but as the likelihood of an allied invasion of mainland Europe increased, Oldenbroek sought a more formal agreement. The aim was to offer all assistance in the development of the 'second front'. In exchange for sabotage behind enemy lines and the efficient organisation of transport workers once territory had been re-occupied, the ITF wanted help in reconstructing the European trade union movement. Separate agreements were drawn up for both the invasion of Italy and for the Normandy landings, but the historical record is unclear as to whether the documents with the OSS and the British Ministry of War were ever signed.