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# Against Japanese and Italian Imperialism: The Anti-War Campaigns of Communist International Trade Union Organizations, 1931–1936

## ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the international anti-war campaigns of the *International of Seamen and Harbour Workers* (ISH) and the *International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (ITUCNW) against Japanese imperialism in Manchuria and Italian imperialism in Ethiopia during the first half of the 1930s. Both crises propelled international campaigns, ‘Hands off China’ and ‘Hands off Abyssinia’, that were orchestrated by the Third (Communist) International or the *Comintern* and the *Red International of Labour Unions* (*Profintern*) and their affiliated organisations such as the ISH and ITUCNW. *Comintern/Profintern* anti-war campaigns were organized under the banner of the prevailing ‘class-against-class’ strategy. In practice, this meant that the campaigns were both calls for international solidarity and at the same time attempts to position communist activities against those of the ‘social fascists’, i.e., socialist, social democratic, reformist and/or syndicalist controlled parties and trade unions.

Keywords: *anti-imperialism; anti-colonialism; anti-war; Comintern; Profintern; Manchurian crisis; Ethiopian crisis; seamen; harbour workers*

## Introduction

The 1930s were marked by three crises that hit international headlines before 1939—the Manchurian crisis in 1931/32, the Ethiopian crisis in 1935/36 and the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939. While the last-mentioned crisis is well known for the calls for international solidarity to support the Spanish Republic,<sup>1</sup> the international campaigns

1 E.H. Carr: *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War*, London 1984; Svetlana Pozharskaya: *Comintern and the Spanish Civil War*, in: *Ebre* 38:1 (2003), pp. 47–56; Stanley G. Payne: *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism*, New Haven/London 2004;

during the two earlier crises are barely remembered today.<sup>2</sup> Still, the silence is somewhat appalling, although eventually not surprising, as will be outlined in the essay. The three crises can be defined as global events and in all of them there was an underlying left-right division of interpretations, agency and actions. Each of the three crises propelled international campaigns that were orchestrated by the *Third (Communist) International* or the *Comintern* and its various mass-organisations. However, there exists a clear division between the first two international campaigns and the last one. While the two former ones were organised under the banner of the prevailing ‘class-against-class’ strategy of the *Comintern*, the latter one was the first—and only—international campaign shaped by the ‘popular front’ strategy which the *Comintern* assumed in 1935. In practice, this meant that the two former campaigns were both calls for international solidarity and at the same time attempts to position communist activities against those of the ‘social fascists’, i.e., socialist, social democratic, reformist and/or syndicalist controlled parties and trade unions. With the official turn of the *Comintern* to the popular front strategy during its Seventh World Congress in August 1935, its calls for international solidarity and actions against imperialist aggression stressed the need for a unified approach. When the nationalist opposition staged its rightist counter-revolution and coup in Spain in July 1936, the left of all denominations started to rally behind anti-fascist calls or at least sympathised with the Republic—throughout Europe as well as on a global scale.

The aim of this essay is to analyse the international campaigns of the *Comintern* during the Manchurian and Ethiopian crises by focusing on the political propaganda produced by two organisations, namely the *International of Seamen and Harbour Workers (Internationale der Seefahrer und Hafenarbeiter, ISH)* and the *International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW)*. Both organizations had been established by the *Red International of Labour Unions (RILU or Profintern)* in 1930. The article is based on source material from the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, the German Federal Archives, the Swedish National Archives and the Danish Labour Movement

Daniel Kowalsky: *Stalin and the Spanish Civil War*, New York 2004; David Featherstone: Black Internationalism, Subaltern Cosmopolitanism, and the Spatial Politics of Antifascism, in: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103:6 (2013), pp. 1406–1420; Lisa A. Kirschenbaum: *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion*, New York 2015.

- 2 On international campaigns during the Manchurian crisis, see Josephine Fowler: *Japanese and Chinese Immigrant Activists: Organizing in American and International Communist Movements*, New Brunswick, NJ 2007; Tom Buchanan: *East Wind: China and the British Left, 1925–1976*, Oxford 2012; Anna Belogurova: Networks, Parties, and the “Oppressed Nations”: The Comintern and Chinese Communists Overseas, 1926–1935, in: *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 6:2 (2017), pp. 558–582. On international mobilisation during the Ethiopian crisis, see Joseph Fronczak: Local People’s Global Politics: A Transnational History of the Hands off Ethiopia Movement of 1935, in: *Diplomatic History* 39:2 (2015), pp. 245–274.

Archives as well as published material of the two organisations. Although both crises resulted in calls for international campaigns, only the latter one caused an outright outcry throughout Africa, Europe and America.<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, therefore, as I have demonstrated in my previous studies on the ITUCNW, the Ethiopian crisis was not only the watershed in African as well as Black history but as much in the African work of the *Comintern*.<sup>4</sup> However, the international campaigns of the ISH have hitherto not received any attention. Also, as will be highlighted in the essay, the activities of both organisations were closely interlinked. Therefore, the key question to be asked is to what kind of interdependence existed between the campaigns of the two organisations? Further, to what extent did the ITUCNW carry out independent campaigns? The latter question is an intriguing one as the organisation was originally projected to work in close tandem with the ISH. In fact, according to the various resolutions or instructions issued by the *Comintern* and *Profintern* on the tasks of the ITUCNW, its activities were to be monitored by and closely linked to those of the ISH.<sup>5</sup>

The Manchurian crisis started with the so-called ‘Mukden incident’ in 1931 while the Ethiopian crisis was triggered by a border clash at Walwal in the Ogaden desert in early December 1934. During the former crisis, the *Comintern* and the *Profintern* and their various affiliated organisations were known for quickly responding to imperial and colonial aggression. However, in contrast to the Manchurian crisis, the Ethiopian crisis marked a break in political mobilisation especially in the African Atlantic. Whereas communist organisations had been the driving force behind previous global campaigns in support for victims of imperialist aggression, the *Comintern* for reasons to be analysed

- 3 W.R. Scott: *African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941*, Bloomington 1993; Barbara Bush: *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain 1919–1945*, London 1999; Richard Pankhurst: *Pro- and Anti-Ethiopian Pamphleteering in Britain during the Italian Fascist Invasion and Occupation (1935–41)*, in: *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 1:1 (2003), pp. 153–176; Neelam Srivastava: *Anti-colonialism and the Italian Left*, in: *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 8:3 (2006), pp. 413–429; David Featherstone: *Solidarities: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism*, London/New York 2012.
- 4 Holger Weiss: *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, Leiden 2014; Holger Weiss: *Between Moscow and the African Atlantic: The Comintern Networks of Negro Workers*, in: *monde(s) histoire, espaces, relations* 10 (novembre 2016), pp. 89–108; Holger Weiss: *Global Ambitions, Structural Constraints and Marginality as a Choice: The International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, in: Holger Weiss (ed.): *The Global Dimension of Radical International Solidarity Organizations during the Interwar Period*, Leiden 2017, pp. 318–362.
- 5 See further: Holger Weiss: *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, p. 292 and Chapters 7.2–7.5.

below remained passive and did not take a leading role in organising a global ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ campaign.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Pan-Africanist mobilisation for the defence of Ethiopian independence is highlighted in the historiography of the Ethiopian crisis.<sup>7</sup>

As will be claimed in the first part of this essay, the 1931 Mukden incident and the following Japanese attack on China are identified as test cases for Comintern strategies for global campaigns. The Mukden incident and the Manchurian crisis resembled the Walwal incident and the Ethiopian crisis in many ways: China and Ethiopia were both members of the *League of Nations* and in both cases, the *League* failed miserably at finding a diplomatic solution to the crisis. But while the *Comintern* and communist organisations were quick to react to the Manchurian crisis, the silence in Moscow in 1935 was appalling. Nevertheless, some communist organisations were quick to react to the Italian aggression, above all the ITUCNW that had already issued its first call for ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ in late 1934. Other organisations, especially the *League Against Imperialism* and the ISH joined the campaign in 1935. The question to be answered in the latter part of this essay is therefore: what was done and what was the effect and impact of the communist-led ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ campaigns in 1935–1936?

## Background: From ‘United Front’ to ‘United Front from Below’-Tactics

Propaganda and action for radical international solidarity was also the core message of the *Comintern*. In contrast to the prevailing socialist and social democratic political doctrine that at best articulated a lukewarm but non-condemning position towards colonialism and the colonial system, the *Comintern* had taken an openly negative position towards the colonial order and had already voiced its condemnation of both imperialism and colonialism at the Baku Anti-Colonial Conference in 1920. In contrast to the *Second (Socialist) International*, the *Comintern* called for the abolition of the colonial order and the right of nations to freedom, independence and self-government, culminating in the

6 For a similar argument, see Tom Buchanan: ‘The Dark Millions in the Colonies are Unavenged’: Anti-Fascism and Anti-Imperialism in the 1930s, in: *Contemporary European History* 25:4 (2106), pp. 645–665.

7 J.E. Harris: *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia, 1936–41*, Baton Rouge 1994.

*Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in the Colonial and Semi-Colonial Countries*, better known as the *Colonial Theses*,<sup>8</sup> adopted by the Sixth World Congress of the *Comintern* in 1928.<sup>9</sup>

Starting with the ‘Hands off Syria’ and ‘Hands off China’ campaigns in 1925, the *Comintern* and its affiliated organisations had orchestrated several global anti-colonial and anti-imperialist campaigns.<sup>10</sup> The mastermind of these campaigns was the German communist Willi Münzenberg<sup>11</sup>, Secretary General of the International Secretariat of the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* (*Workers’ International Relief*, est. 1921) and the *League against Imperialism* (est. 1927), both located in Berlin. The campaigns launched by Münzenberg followed a concept established when he organised the workers’ relief to alleviate the famine in Soviet-Russia in 1922 and in Germany in 1923 as well as in support of the striking miners in England in 1926 and against imperialist aggression in China during the 1920s, effectively combining propaganda and action. Calls for international solidarity were issued in papers, journals and pamphlets, mass rallies and demonstrations were organised by him and his organisations. In Münzenberg’s mind, propaganda was positive and crucial. Its objective was to enlighten and mobilise the working class and to promote radical, class-based international solidarity.<sup>12</sup>

- 8 The Colonial Theses were prepared almost single-handedly by the Finnish Communist Otto Ville Kuusinen and were presented by him at the 46<sup>th</sup> Session of the Congress on 1 September 1928.
- 9 For an outline on the *Comintern*’s understanding and use of imperialism as a political and instrumental tool, see Fredrik Peterson: *Imperialism and the Communist International*, in: *Journal of Labor and Society* 20 (March 2017), pp. 23–42.
- 10 See further Fredrik Petersson: “We Are Neither Visionaries Nor Utopian Dreamers”: Willi Münzenberg, the League against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925–1933, Vol. I–II, Lewiston 2013; Fredrik Petersson: *Hub of the Anti-Imperialist Movement: The League against Imperialism and Berlin, 1927–1933*, in: *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 16:1 (2014), pp. 49–71; Kasper Braskén: *The International Workers’ Relief, Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany*, Basingstoke 2015.
- 11 See on him e.g. Bernhard H. Bayerlein, *Willi Münzenberg’s ‘Last Empire’: Die Zukunft and the ‘Franco-German Union’, Paris, 1938–1940. New Visions of Anti-Fascism and the Transnational Networks of the Anti-Hitler Resistance*, in: *Moving the Social* 58 (2017), pp. 51–80.
- 12 Hans Piazza: *The Anti-Imperialist League and the Chinese Revolution*, in: Mechthild Leutner et al. (eds.): *The Chinese Revolution in the 1920s: Between Triumph and Disaster*, London/New York 2002, pp. 166–176; Thomas Kampen: *Solidarität und Propaganda: Willi Münzenberg, die Internationale Arbeiterhilfe und China*, in: *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte* 5:2 (2004), pp. 99–106; Tom Buchanan: *China and the British Left in the Twentieth Century: Transnational Perspectives*, in: *Labour History* 54:5 (2012), pp. 540–553; Kasper Braskén: *The British Miners’ and General Strike of 1926: Problems and Practices of Radical International Solidarity*, in: Holger Weiss (ed.): *The Global Dimension of Radical International Solidarity Organizations during the Interwar Period*, Leiden/Boston 2017, pp. 168–190. For an

The Sixth World Congress marked the *Comintern's* turn to a new strategy. Whereas cooperation with socialist/reformist/social democratic parties and organisations had been attempted during the 1920s (but usually rejected by the socialist and social democratic leadership),<sup>13</sup> the Congress condemned the previous strategy, issued the 'class-against-class' doctrine, and declined any further cooperation with the socialist or radical bourgeois organisations and activists. Known as the 'Third Period' in *Comintern* historiography, the 'class-against-class' doctrine resulted in the 'Stalinisation' of various national communist parties.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, the strategic turn of the *Comintern* was closely linked to political manoeuvres in the Kremlin, Stalin's rise to power and the fear of the Bolshevik leadership of an imminent military attack against Soviet-Russia and 'imperialist war' by Great Britain and France to erase the 'Fatherland of the Toilers'. Also, as Neil Redfern has underlined, neither before nor after the 1928 *Colonial Theses* did the *Comintern* break with its Eurocentric analysis of world affairs.<sup>15</sup>

Connecting anti-colonialism and radical international solidarity, the *Colonial Theses* heavily criticised both European social democratic leaders and the colonial national bourgeoisie for betraying the anti-colonial struggle and for seeking rapprochement with the imperialist powers. Instead, the *Colonial Theses* stressed the unity shared by the socialist world revolution and the labouring masses, the proletariat and the peasants,

outline of the LAI campaigns, see Fredrik Petersson: History, Transnational Connections and Anti-Imperial Intentions: The League against Imperialism and for National Independence (1927–1937), in: Immanuel Ness/Zak Cope/Saer Ba (eds.): The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism, New York 2015, pp. 688–696.

- 13 See Fourth Congress of the Communist International, Theses on the United Front, adopted by the Executive Committee of the Comintern, December 1922, at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/unity-front.htm> (accessed 10 July 2018).
- 14 However, the Stalinization Thesis has resulted in heated debates on its impact among others in Germany, see Klaus-Michael Mallmann: *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik: Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung*, Darmstadt 1996, and Andreas Wirsching: "Stalinisierung" oder entideologisierte "Nischengesellschaft"? Alte Einsichten und neue Thesen zum Charakter der KPD in der Weimarer Republik, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 46 (1998), pp. 449–466. For a recent discussion, see Bert Hoppe: *In Stalins Gefolgschaft: Moskau und die KPD 1928–1933*, München 2007; Hermann Weber: *Stalinization of the KPD: Old and New Views*, in: Norman LaPorte/Kevin Morgan/Matthew Worley (eds.): *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern*, London 2008, pp. 22–44, and Marcel Bois: *Kommunisten gegen Hitler und Stalin: Die Linke Opposition der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, Essen 2014. For Britain, see Matthew Worley: *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars*, London/New York 2002.
- 15 Neil Redfern: *Class or Nation: Communists, Imperialism, and Two World Wars*, London 2006.

of the colonies. Consequently, the *Theses* called for the creation and development of communist parties, as well as workers' and peasants' unions in the colonial areas and rejected all collaboration with nationalist movements.<sup>16</sup>

Global campaigns launched by various communist organisations after 1928 followed the 'class-against-class' perspective. As previously, any campaign orchestrated by Münzenberg or others had to receive official backing from the *Comintern* headquarters. However, in contrast to the earlier 'united front' tactics of inviting non-communist radical organisations and activists to join a campaign, the new doctrine of 'united front from below' rejected any official cooperation with non-communist radical organisations though still inviting non-communists to join the campaign. Also, any campaign that was launched after 1928 was ultimately connected with Soviet foreign security, as was underlined in the 1927 *Imperialist War Theses*. According to these theses, any imperialist war or conflict could develop into a new world war which ultimately aimed at eradicating the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> Communist parties and labour unions were therefore to establish anti-war committees and call for boycotts of the shipment of weapons and munitions to theatres of war anywhere on the globe.<sup>18</sup>

## Part I. The Test Case: Japan's Attack on China in 1931

The test case for the new strategy was the 1931 attack by Japan on China and the occupation of Manchuria. The conflict had several similarities to the 1935 Ethiopian crisis. In September 1931, a bomb exploded on the railway line near Mukden. The incident was taken by the Japanese imperial forces as a pretext to launch a full invasion of Manchuria. The Chinese Foreign Ministry responded by issuing a strong protest to the Japanese government and called for an immediate stop to all military operations. In addition, the Chinese government appealed to the *League of Nations*. The *League*, in turn, passed a resolution in October 1931, mandating the withdrawal of Japanese troops. However, Japan rejected the resolution and demanded direct negotiations with

- 16 Edward T. Wilson: *Russia and Black Africa Before World War II*, New York 1974, pp. 166–167, 171–172.
- 17 *Theses of the Eighth ECCI Plenum on War and the Danger of War*, 29 May 1927, in: *Inprekorr* 7:61 (1927), p. 1285. See also: *Extracts from the Resolution of the Tenth ECCI Plenum on the International Day of Struggle Against Imperialist War*, July 1929, in: Jane Degras (ed.): *Communist International 1919–1943: Documents, Volume III. 1919–1943*, London/New York 1971, pp. 64–67.
- 18 ISH: *An alle Seeleute, Hafentarbeiter und Binnenschiffer! Grosse Gefahr des drohenden Angriffs der Imperialisten auf den Sowjetstaat: Schützt die Sowjetunion*, in: *Rotes Gewerkschafts-Bulletin* 78/9, 13.12.1930, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (German Federal Archives) BArchB R1501/20224 Reichsministerium des Inneren: *Internationale Hafentbüros und Seemannklubs*, Jan. 1930 – Nov. 1933, fol. 31.

the Chinese government. Also, the *League* launched several investigations into the crisis. The conflict remained unresolved until March 1933, when Japan established the puppet state of Manchukuo, an act that was not recognised by the League and resulted in Japan's resignation from it.<sup>19</sup>

The Japanese attack on Manchuria posed a problem for the Soviet Union. Tsarist Russia had built the Chinese Eastern Railway and full operations had started in 1903. After 1924, China and Soviet-Russia administered the northern branch jointly, while the southern branch was controlled by Japan. In 1929, a local Chinese warlord tried to take control over the northern branch, leading to a minor Sino-Soviet armed conflict that confirmed the joint Soviet-Chinese administration of the line. Japan's imperial occupation of Manchuria thus threatened Soviet strategic and economic interests in the region. However, as the Soviet Union was not a member of the *League of Nations*, it could not participate in international diplomatic negotiations. On the other hand, the Soviet Union could not risk an open conflict with Japan, either. Instead, the official Soviet position was a biased neutral one: as the Soviet Union had hostile relations with the Chinese Kuomintang Government, it prohibited Chinese forces from using the railway while it permitted the transportation of Japanese troops.<sup>20</sup>

Official Soviet policy towards Japan oscillated between the promotion of a peace policy and verbal condemnation of the Japanese attack published in the Soviet press. The military presence of Japan in the Far East was a challenge for Soviet security policy. The main objective of Soviet foreign policy was to avert the threat of an imperialist invasion and to implement an appeasement policy towards Japan, culminating in offering a non-aggression pact to Japan at the end of 1931. For months, the Japanese left the Soviet invitation unanswered.<sup>21</sup> Although the Soviet Union officially claimed to be neutral in the conflict, the Japanese expansion in China aroused concern in Moscow. After the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and China in 1932, Moscow secretly started paying resistance leaders for rearming and subverting Japanese rule in their puppet state Manchukuo.<sup>22</sup>

Communist response to the Japanese aggression was orchestrated by the Comintern combining the 'united front from below' tactics and the *War Theses*. The *Comintern's* West European Bureau as well as the European Bureau of the *Profintern*, both located in Berlin, issued a joint statement condemning the Japanese attack on China in September

- 19 Thomas W. Burkman: *Japan and the League of Nations: Empire and World Order, 1914–1938*, Honolulu 2008.
- 20 George Alexander Lensen: *The Damned Inheritance: The Soviet Union and the Manchurian crisis 1924–1935*, Tallahassee, FL 1974.
- 21 Jonathan Haslam: *Soviet Foreign Policy 1930–1933: The Impact of the Depression*, London/Basingstoke 1983, pp. 79–82.
- 22 Rana Mitter: *The Manchurian Myth: Nationalism, Resistance, and Collaboration in Modern China*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2000, p. 93.



1931.<sup>23</sup> Georgi Dimitrov, the head of the West European Bureau, sent a message to Moscow and urged the *Comintern* to issue an order to all communist parties to step up a campaign against the threat of war and in defence of the Soviet Union. However, the *Comintern* headquarters were slow to react. Only in November did the *Comintern* issue an appeal in which it warned that the Far Eastern conflict might lead to a world war and that the Japanese were preparing to attack the Soviet Union. The appeal included a call to establish China aid committees and to organise protest meetings and demonstrations against Japanese aggression.<sup>24</sup>

However, mass mobilisation for China proved difficult to organize for the communist parties. In Britain, for example, the British communist trade union activist George Hardy blamed the lack of political mobilisation during its opening phase in the autumn of 1931 on the fact that few workers had any idea of the conflict, lest knew where Manchuria was located.<sup>25</sup> The inactivity of the communist parties resulted in harsh criticism from the *Comintern*. After the attack by Japanese forces on Shanghai, the stronghold of the Chinese Communist Party, in late January 1931, the *Comintern* demanded outright action from the communist parties.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the British Communist Party made substantial efforts during the spring of 1932 at popular mobilisation on the left. However, the campaign did not live up to expectations and failure to involve the industrial workers resulted in much self-criticism. For example, Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Party since 1929, acknowledged the fact that the campaign had not been effective.<sup>27</sup>

Campaigns for the defence of China by other communist organisations were a different matter. Münzenberg and the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* (Workers' International Relief) quickly took a leading role and organised a campaign against Japanese imperialist aggression. Especially after the February 1932 *Comintern* reminder, the 'Hands off China' campaign was intensified and was incorporated into the annual campaign against imperialist war and for the defence of the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup>

The grand strategy of the communist-led 'Hands off China' campaigns was to call for a trade union boycott on commerce with Japan. The core group to be mobilised were the anti-war cells of dockers and seamen, their task being to block shipments of ammunition

- 23 Appeal by the West European Bureau of the ECCI and the European Secretariat of the RILU on the Japanese Invasion of Manchuria, in: *Inprekorr* XI:93, 29 September 1931, p. 2080, see Jane Degras: *Communist International 1919–1943*, p. 176.
- 24 Jonathan Haslam: *Soviet Foreign Policy 1930–1933: The Impact of the Depression*, pp. 86–87.
- 25 Tom Buchanan: *East Wind: China and the British Left, 1925–1976*, p. 53.
- 26 Jonathan Haslam: *Soviet Foreign Policy 1930–1933: The Impact of the Depression*, pp. 87–88.
- 27 Buchanan: *East Wind: China and the British Left, 1925–1976*, pp. 54–55.
- 28 See further: Kasper Braskén: *In Pursuit of Global International Solidarity? The Transnational Networks of the International Workers' Relief, 1921–1935*, in: Holger Weiss (ed.): *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939*, Leiden/Boston 2017, pp. 130–167.

and war material to the Japanese troops in China. To further strengthen the campaign, the European Bureau of the *Profintern*, in February 1932, issued a direct call to all metal and harbour workers to prevent the transportation of military supplies destined for the use against China and the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup> At this point, the ‘Hands off China’ campaign had been incorporated by other communist organisations, such as the ISH and the ITUCNW. The activities of these organisations will be discussed in detail below as they show the interlinkages between the ‘Hands off China’ campaigns.

## Calling for Global Solidarity of Seamen and Harbour Workers

A central pillar of the anti-war campaign of the *Comintern* had been the establishment of a system to survey and report movement of armaments and ammunition. This was the task of local cells and committees established in factories and harbours as well as aboard the ships. The responsibility for the establishment of such units was given to the various national communist-led labour unions and organisations and their international steering organisations. Key among them was the ISH with its headquarters in Hamburg. This organisation had been established in October 1930 as a platform for radical (red) unions of sea transport workers with national sections all over the globe.<sup>30</sup>

The ‘Hands off China’ campaign was the first global call for international political mobilisation of the ISH. The objective of the campaign, the ISH Secretariat informed its national sections in December 1931, was twofold. First, the task was to expose the *International Transport Workers’ Federation* (ITF) for its ‘social fascist’ tendencies and its support of imperialist war efforts. Second, the national sections were to establish local anti-war committees. The ITF was accused of bluffing—its call to stop the transportation of war material to the Far East was claimed to be bogus; instead, the ISH called the seamen to boycott all shipments of military material to Japan.<sup>31</sup> Already in its ‘Resolution on the

29 Rote Einheitsfront gegen den räuberischen Überfall auf China und gegen das imperialistische Kriegskomplott gegen die Sowjetunion und Sowjet-China: Kampf gegen die eigenen Ausbeuter und ihre Helfer: Reichskomitee Agitprop Anfang Februar 1932; BArchB R1501/20442 Reichsministerium des Inneren, KPD – Revolutionäre Gewerkschaftsbewegung, Jan. 1932 – Mai 1932, fol. 469.

30 See further 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/Boston 2017, pp. 256–317.

31 ITF och kampen mot kriget, in: *Ny Dag* 4.12.1931, SÄPO Äldre Aktsystemet Volym 280 VIII B 2 Pärn VIII B 2 1, Swedish National Archives (SRA).

Colonial Work' in March 1931, the ISH accused 'social fascist' trade union leaders of the ITF of dividing the ranks of sea transport workers, among others in Japan and China.<sup>32</sup> In its first reaction to the Manchurian crisis, the ISH denounced the ITF for neither having condemned Japanese imperialism, nor the attack on Manchuria. On the contrary, the ISH informed its members, the reformist Japanese seamen union backed its government and the leadership of the British seamen union had rejected the call to boycott Japanese ships. Also, in line with the *Imperialist War Theses*, the Japanese attack was believed to be the first stage of a forthcoming imperialist attack upon the Soviet Union.<sup>33</sup>

The progress—and difficulties—of the 'Hands off China' campaign will be outlined below by focusing on the activities of the national sections of the ISH in the Scandinavian countries. A pamphlet of the ISH was translated into Danish and highlighted the crucial role of the Danish harbour workers as they were tasked to block any shipment of war material through the Danish sounds and on Danish ships.<sup>34</sup> In Sweden, the thread of war and the Manchurian crisis were the prime topics of the national congress of the Swedish ISH Section in December 1931.<sup>35</sup> Whether the initial calls of the ISH and its national sections had any immediate effects is unclear. It is more likely that the national sections started their propaganda and agitation campaign after the renewed call by the European Bureau of the *Profintern* in February 1932. As the ISH fully backed the call, the national sections had to act. Anti-war meetings were organised among others in Stockholm in Sweden and the Swedish section issued a resolution that criticised the reformist leaders for inactivity and sabotaging local boycotts.<sup>36</sup> The first anti-war committee was established in Gothenburg in March and one month later the *Hamn- och Sjöproletären*, the organ of the Swedish ISH section, reminded its readers of the pressing need to establish anti-war committees in each harbour as military equipment also had been shipped to the Far East.<sup>37</sup>

Whether the call to form anti-war committees in Denmark and Sweden had a profound effect is not known. Still, there are some indications of their existence. The Manchurian crisis and the anticipated/feared imperialist war was one of the central themes discussed at the World Congress of the ISH in Altona in late May 1932.<sup>38</sup> Danish and Swedish delegates participated at tactical discussions during the Conference, including those on

- 32 Resolution on the Colonial Work of the Sections of the ISH in the Capitalist Countries, 22.3.1931, Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI) 495/25/1334.
- 33 ITF-kongressen i Belysning af Officielle Dokumenter [ca 1932], s. 2, Richard Jensen's papers, Danish Labour Movement Archives (ABA/Jensen).
- 34 (ISH pamphlet) Søfolk! Havnearbejdere! [published ca 1932], ABA/Jensen.
- 35 R.F.O.s landskonferens, in: Hamn- och Sjöproletären 1:2 (December 1931), p. 5.
- 36 Mot det imperialistiska kriget, in: Hamn- och Sjöproletären 2:2–3 (1932), p. 2.
- 37 Kamp mot kriget—Bilda antikrigskommittéer!, in: Hamn- och Sjöproletären 4 (1932), p. 4.
- 38 Struggle against Imperialist War, in: ISH: The World Unity Congress of the International Water Transport Workers and its Decisions, Hamburg, no date [1932], pp. 13–16.

the need to strengthen the work of the national anti-war committees.<sup>39</sup> As a consequence, a joint Danish-Swedish anti-war meeting was called to be held in Elsinore in early July of the same year.<sup>40</sup> At least in Gothenburg, the new tactics resulted in the establishment of a new unit, the *Röd Hamnkontroll* (Red Harbour Control).<sup>41</sup>

Locally organised boycotts and anti-war activities were to be utilised in international propaganda and agitation campaigns. A successful boycott anywhere on the globe was to be reported in the national organs of the sections as it was to serve as an example to stimulate similar actions in the harbours elsewhere. For example, the readers of *Majakka*, the organ of the illegal Finnish section of the ISH, were informed about a successful action against the ship *Caronia* “in an English harbour”: the harbour workers had delayed the departure of the ship by pouring sulphuric acid into its engine.<sup>42</sup>

As anticipated by the ISH, the ‘Hands off China’ campaign was not backed by the reformist leadership of the national unions of sea transport workers in Scandinavia. As far as the union leadership was concerned, the campaign was nothing more than a communist move to divide the unions. Why boycott the shipment of war equipment to Japan when the Soviet Union was at the same time allowing the transport of Japanese troops on the Soviet-controlled East Manchurian railway, the editor of the Swedish Reformist union journal *Sjömannen* asked?<sup>43</sup> Also, the so-called ‘peace propaganda’ of the communists was nothing more than a bluff and one of the few successful boycotts in a Swedish harbour turned out to be directed against a ship carrying gun powder to Turkey, mocked the journal.<sup>44</sup> The communist journal *Hamn-och Sjöproletären* did not reply to these accusations. Typically, it regarded the reformist critique as nothing else but a veiled attack by the capitalists and ship owners who sided with the Japanese imperialists. Nevertheless, the discrepancies between Soviet and *Comintern/Profintern* policies during the Manchurian crisis must have been difficult to explain for the party’s rank and file when they were confronted by socialist or non-organised seamen and harbour workers.

The various calls for boycott of military shipments did not result in mass mobilisation of the local workers. Although the communists tried to organise local strikes and actions in various harbours throughout Western Europe and the USA, they usually failed to prevent

39 Kämpft gegen den imperialistischen Krieg! Der Erste Einheitskongress des internationalen Wassertransportproletariats an die Seeleute, Hafenarbeiter, Binnenschiffer und Fischer aller Länder!, in: Hamburger Volkszeitung Nr. 121, 26.5.1932, RGASPI 458/9/54, fol. 20; Organisiert das Stoppen der Kriegstransporte! Der internationale Seeleutekongress an das Wasserproletariat der ganzen Welt!, in: Ruhr-Echo Nr. 110, 28.5.1932, RGASPI 458/9/54, fol. 78.

40 Till Helsingör, in: Hamn- och Sjöproletären 2:6 (1932), p. 4.

41 Stormklockan 9–16.6.1932, SÄPO Äldre Aktsystemet Volym 294 Pärm VIII C 3 Interklubb och Röd Marin, Pärm 1, SRA.

42 Miten aselaivan lähtö estetään, in: Majakka 6 (joulukuu 1932), p. 32.

43 Internationell orientering, in: Sjömannen 5 (1932), p. 131.

44 Vad är krigsmaterial och hur förhindra krig?, in: Sjömannen 8 (1932), pp. 225–226.

the transportation of war equipment to the Japanese forces. In Britain, for example, the radical left as well as the *Seamen Minority Movement*, the national section of the ISH in Britain, were unable to persuade harbour workers to take action, and munitions vessels such as the *Glenshiel* in April 1932 and the 'death ship' *Glengarry* in May 1932 managed to embark from British ports.<sup>45</sup> In Sweden, where the formation of harbour cells and anti-war committees had been slow, the national section of the ISH critically remarked that several shipments of war material had left Sweden during the spring of 1932.<sup>46</sup>

A shift in the ISH campaign occurred in the following year. Although the Japanese attack had come to a standstill, the situation in the Far East remained tense. Japan was still portrayed as a militarist and imperialist aggressor in communist propaganda publications but a new danger was amounting in China where the nationalist government forces under Chiang Kai-shek had started a full-scale attack upon the communist strongholds in Jiangxi Province. Consequently, the *Comintern* headquarters in Moscow issued a call to defend Soviet China in October 1933.<sup>47</sup>

The call for a new campaign was problematic for the International Secretariat of the ISH. Communist activities had come to a standstill in Germany after the Nazi takeover in February/March 1933 and the ISH had to relocate its office to Copenhagen. Still, the ISH Secretariat tried its best to resume its international operations and to inform the national sections of the renewed campaign. This time, however, the campaign was targeted to block the shipment of armaments to China. By December 1933, the new campaign was in full swing in at least the Scandinavian countries and leaflets were circulating in Danish and Swedish harbours calling for a boycott of transport of war material to China.<sup>48</sup>

The crisis in China escalated the next year. By October 1934, the communists had to abandon their strongholds in Jiangxi and retreated to Shaanxi Province. Fear of a total annihilation of Soviet China propelled the European Secretariat of the *Profintern* to implement a new strategy, namely the merger of 'Hands off China' with the anti-war campaigns. The new campaign was to be coordinated by a new planning committee, consisting of members of the ISH International Secretariat—which by this time was situated in Antwerp—and representatives of the International Propaganda Committees of railway workers and metal workers. The task of the ISH Secretariat was to approach the ITF and invite them to form an international anti-war committee.<sup>49</sup> The national

45 Tom Buchanan: *East Wind: China and the British Left, 1925–1976*, p. 52.

46 Hamn- och Sjöproletären 4 (1932).

47 Henri [Luigi Polano] to Genosse Schmidt, 22.10.1933, RGASPI 534/5/236, fol. 125–126.

48 ISH leaflet, December 1933, FX:6 Kommunistiska handlingar 1930–1933, Stockholmspolisens kriminalavdelning Rotel 6 med föregångare, SÄPO, SRA; Sovjet-Kina, in: Hamnarbetaren. Organ för hamnarbetarna 1:1 (1934), pp. 3–4, SÄPO Äldre Aktsystemet Volym 295 VIII C 3 Interklubb och Röd Marin, Pärm 3, SRA.

49 Report by Comrade René, 24.4.1934, RGASPI 534/4/493, fol. 224–225.

sections of the ISH were urged to launch a similar initiative.<sup>50</sup> Not surprisingly, however, both the ITF and the various national reformist trade unions rejected the invitation in late November 1934.<sup>51</sup> Whether the ISH call for a renewed campaign received any response from its sections and whether it was implemented on the ground is unknown and deserves further studies.

## Calling for Black Toilers to Defend China and the Soviet Union

Although the ITUCNW or *Hamburg Committee* had officially been established in July 1930, its operative work started only in November 1930 when its secretary James W. Ford settled in Hamburg. Officially independent, the ITUCNW had its office in the same building as the ISH headquarters and the *International Seamen's Club*, namely at 8, Rothesoodstrasse in Hamburg. Any operational and strategic decisions by the Secretary of the *Hamburg Committee* had to be discussed with Albert Walter, the Secretary of the ISH and the comrades in Berlin and Moscow. The intimate structural connections between the ISH and the *Hamburg Committee* were part and parcel of the grand strategy designed in Moscow. The ISH Secretariat and the local *International Seamen's Club* were to be assisted by the *Hamburg Committee* in their "special work" among African and African-Caribbean seamen.<sup>52</sup>

The close cooperation between the ISH Secretariat and the *Hamburg Committee* in propaganda and agitation work among black seamen and harbour workers was demonstrated during the Manchurian crisis. However, compared to the ISH which directed its calls to its national sections, the ITUCNW could only use its mouthpiece, *The Negro Worker*, for propaganda and agitation purposes. Also, as will be argued below, it is very likely that the calls to join the 'Hands off China' campaign published in *The Negro Worker* had been drafted or at least been approved by the ISH Secretariat. On the other hand, while the ITUCNW campaign was part of the ISH grand strategy to reach out in the African Atlantic, ITUCNW Secretary George Padmore integrated his own twist into the campaign, namely to use it as part of his attack on reformist or bourgeois black leadership.<sup>53</sup>

50 Confidential instructions to the leading functionaries of the ISH-sections, 8.11.1934, RGASPI 534/5/241, fol. 271–274.

51 Report by Comrade René, 10.12.1934, RGASPI 534/4/493, fol. 273–274.

52 Duties and Tasks of [ISH] Secretariat Members, (undated) directives issued in Moscow, filed 17.3.1931, RGASPI 534/5/220, fol. 128–129.

53 See further: Holger Weiss: "Negro Workers, defend the Soviet Union and the Chinese Revolution!" *The International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers and the Class-*

A first call for global solidarity was published in *The Negro Worker* in late 1931. In line with the *Imperialist War Theses* which also had been adopted by the ITUCNW,<sup>54</sup> the black toilers were called to act against the Japanese aggressors and to defend the Soviet Union.<sup>55</sup> For the following six months, *The Negro Worker* was to carry in each issue calls to the black toilers in the African Atlantic to join the ‘Hands off China’ campaign. In March 1932, the ITUCNW officially rallied behind the resolution on the war in the Far East by the ISH and urged black dock workers and seamen to stop the transportation of war material to Japan.<sup>56</sup> The covers of both the March and the April issues of *The Negro Worker* carried the slogans of the global campaign—“Hands off China” and “Defend the Soviet Union!” as well as demanding “Down With the Imperialist War Mongers!” and “Not a Gun for the Imperialist War Mongers!”. In May, the readers were reminded that to defend the Soviet Union was to defend the interests of the working-class and were urged to protest against Japanese imperialism and Western interference in China: “Negro Workers! Rally to fight against the Japanese robber war! Against the war inciters and war criminals! For immediate withdrawal of all imperialist troops and gun boats from China! Against the partition of China and for the defense of the Chinese Soviet districts!”<sup>57</sup> Padmore was quick to notify his readers that both France and Britain were supporting Japanese war efforts by sending war materials to the Far East.<sup>58</sup>

However, a close reading of *The Negro Worker* reveals that the ‘Hands off China’-campaign soon became of peripheral interest of the ITUCNW. What mattered more to Padmore was the international campaign in support of the Scottsboro Boys. The ‘Scottsboro Boys’ were nine young African Americans who had been charged with the rape of two white girls in Scottsboro, Alabama in March 1931. The evidence was dubious and was challenged both by the bourgeois as well as the left-wing press. When the local court sentenced them to death in April 1931, a nationwide wave of protest against the lynch justice in the U.S. South was organised by the *International Labor Defence* and

Before-Race Rhetoric in *The Negro Worker*, in: *Viewpoint Magazine: A Journal of Marxist theory and viewpoints* 6, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2018/02/01/negro-workers-defend-soviet-union-chinese-revolution-international-trade-union-committee-negro-workers-political-rhetoric-negro-worker/> (published online 1 February 2018).

- 54 A resolution had been adopted by the ITUCNW already in July 1930. It was republished as *Negro Workers, Fight Against the War!*, in: *The Negro Worker* 2:1–2 (January-February 1932), pp. 25–28.
- 55 *The War Danger: War in the East: Negro Workers, defend the Soviet Union and the Chinese Revolution!*, in: *The Negro Worker*, 1:10–11 (October-November 1931), p. 3.
- 56 G.P., *War in the East*, in: *The Negro Worker*, 2:3 (March 1932), p. 9.
- 57 Cyril Briggs: *Negro Workers, Fight Against Intervention*, in: *The Negro Worker* 2:5 (May 1932), p. 8.
- 58 George Padmore: *The World Today*, in: *The Negro Worker* 2:8 (August 1932), p. 2.

was made a global affair by the *International Red Aid*.<sup>59</sup> In June 1931, the Secretariat of the *Profintern* ordered the *Hamburg Committee* to develop the Scottsboro campaign into a mass mobilization of black workers throughout the African Atlantic,<sup>60</sup> a task that especially Padmore was to put at the forefront of his activities when he took over the Hamburg Secretariat. From May 1932 onwards, the ITUCNW and its mouthpiece were to solely concentrate on the Scottsboro campaign,<sup>61</sup> leaving the issue of calling black seamen and harbour workers to support the 'Hands off China'-campaign solely to the ISH.

## Part II. The *Comintern* and the Abyssinian Crisis 1934–35: The Silence in Moscow

In contrast to the Manchurian crisis, the *Comintern* remained passive during the Ethiopian crisis and for months refrained from commenting on the issue at all. This was largely due to the Nazi takeover and the collapse of legal communist activities in Germany in 1933. The headquarters of all *Comintern* and *Profintern* bureaus, secretariats and affiliated organisations in Germany were dismantled and had to be re-established in countries where either global communist activities were under the surveillance of government and police authorities or where communications with Moscow and the wider world proved difficult.

The silence in Moscow was mainly due to the complicated diplomatic conditions that prevailed in late 1934 and during 1935. Soviet foreign policy's main priority was to safeguard the agreements between the Soviet Union and France as well as Czechoslovakia that had been negotiated in 1934 as the two new pillars of the new Soviet security schemes. Italy played a crucial role in the new policy. The Soviet Union needed the cooperation with Fascist Italy to contain Nazi German expansionism. Mussolini's Ethiopian ambitions therefore posed an acute dilemma for the Soviet Government: how to block Italian aggression and at the same time safeguard the Soviet European security system? The situation became even more complicated after the French Prime Minister Pierre Laval's negotiations with Mussolini in early January 1935, when Mussolini seemed to have obtained *carte blanche* with respect to his handling of the Ethiopian question. It was not in the interest of Soviet foreign policy to support the British standpoint of putting the Ethiopian issue on the agenda of the Council of the *League of Nations*. An open clash

59 On the international Scottsboro Campaign, see James A. Miller, Susan D. Pennybaker, and Eve Rosenhaft: Mother Ada Wright and the International Campaign to Free the Scottsboro Boys, 1931–1934, in: *The American Historical Review* 106:2 (2001), pp. 387–430.

60 Concrete proposals on Report of Work of Hamburg Committee, 10.6.1931, RGASPI 534/3/668, fol. 25–26.

61 See further: Holger Weiss: *Framing A Radical African Atlantic*, Chapter 7.4.3.



between Britain and Italy would have paralysed the formation of a united front against Germany, the prime objective of Soviet foreign policy. Therefore, the strategy was to handle the Ethiopian crisis in negotiations outside the *League* and behind closed doors. Least of all, the Kremlin and the Soviet Foreign Ministry were interested in a high-profile Ethiopian campaign orchestrated by the *Comintern*.<sup>62</sup>

Officially, the *Comintern* refrained from commenting on the Ethiopian crisis until September 1935 (see below). However, already in January 1935, the Political Commission of the *Comintern* had established a special committee to organise an international campaign against Italian aggression.<sup>63</sup> One month later, the Executive Committee of the *Comintern* (ECCI) discussed the crisis. At this point, the ECCI's main interest was to connect the Ethiopian crisis with Japanese imperialism, as it was believed that Japan was trying to establish close military, economic and political relationships with the Ethiopian Emperor.<sup>64</sup>

The first guidelines of the ECCI for political agitation outlined a popular campaign that was to highlight the defence of the national integrity of Ethiopia though not to support the Ethiopian Emperor's regime. The campaign in mind was never projected as a defence of the political independence of the bourgeois and imperialist Ethiopian Empire as such.<sup>65</sup>

A few days later, telegrams were sent to the communist parties. The British Party, for example, was instructed to strengthen its effort to mobilise against the danger of an imperialist war and to expose British imperialism as furthering the Italian aggression. The Party was ordered to characterise the Italian aggression as a "colonial predatory war". The Ethiopian side was to be presented as fighting a "war of national independence" despite both its connections with Japan and the fact that the country was ruled by a "Monarchist feudalist group." Also, the Party was sanctioned to expose the shipment of war armament through the Suez Canal as a rupture of British neutrality and to popularise the anti-war

62 Jonathan Haslam: *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–39*, New York 1984, pp. 60–63; Keith Neilson: *Britain, Soviet Russia and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919–1939*, Cambridge 2004; J. Calvitt Clarke III: *Alliance of the Colored People: Ethiopia and Japan before World War II*, Woodbridge, Suffolk/Rochester, NJ 2011, pp. 106–107, 124; J. Calvitt Clarke III: *Soviet Appeasement, Collective Security and the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935 and 1936*, in: G. Bruce Strang (ed.): *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London/New York 2017, pp. 261–286.

63 Ercoli [Palmiro Togliatti] to Lozovsky, 20.1.1935, RGASPI 534/3/1041, fol. 125.

64 Die japanischen Imperialisten in Abessinien, no author, report dated 22.2.1935, RGASPI 495/4/459, fol. 1–4.

65 Leitsätze für den Kampf gegen den Krieg in Abessinien, no author, memorandum dated 27.2.1935, RGASPI 495/11/2, fol. 4–9.

struggle and ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ campaign.<sup>66</sup> The *League Against Imperialism*, who had been among the first to react on the Italian aggression in December 1934,<sup>67</sup> received instructions to contact the *World Committee Against War and Fascism* in Paris, i.e., the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement,<sup>68</sup> in order to form a delegation for Ethiopia.<sup>69</sup> One month later, in March 1935, the analysis and guidelines were updated by the ECCI,<sup>70</sup> and a reminder of the campaign was sent to the British, French, Swiss, Spanish and U.S. American communist parties in April.<sup>71</sup>

## The ITUCNW and the ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ Campaign, 1934–1935

The only communist organisation that immediately reacted to the Italian aggression in late 1934 was the ITUCNW. Following the Walwal incident in December 1934 and during the escalation of the crisis during the spring of 1935, ITUCNW Secretary Otto Huiswoud—who had replaced Padmore in 1934—time and again called for a united front of black and white workers against Italian imperialist aggression. However, although Huiswoud assured the *Comintern* headquarters that his organisation had taken a leading role in the ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ campaign, this was hardly the case in the African Atlantic.<sup>72</sup> Instead, local, non-communist agencies and organisations in Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, France or Britain spearheaded the campaign.<sup>73</sup> By the summer of 1935, it

66 Quotes from (Intercepted) Telegram Nos. 116–118 from P.C. to C.C., 3 March 1935, published in Nigel West: *MASK: MI5’s Penetration of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, London and New York 2005, p. 147.

67 Annual Report of the League Against Imperialism 1934, RGASPI 542/1/61, fol. 15.

68 On the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, see further: David James Fisher: *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement*; Berkeley 1988, pp. 166–170.

69 (Intercepted) Telegram No. 115 to Anti-Imperialist League, 3 March 1935, published in Nigel West: *MASK*, p. 147.

70 Ferdi: *Ethiopie, sous la menace d’invasion imperialiste. Le fascisme italien se lance à une guerre de rapide en Afrique Orientale*, 20.3.1935, RGASPI 495/11/2, fol. 10–27.

71 Peter [Kerrigan] to Harry Pollitt, [Moscow], no date, handwritten add: 3/VI/35, RGASPI 495/20/44, fol. 46. Similar circular letter in German in RGASPI 495/20/609, fol. 10–12.

72 See further: Holger Weiss: *Global Ambitions, Structural Constraints and Marginality as a Choice: The International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, pp. 348–350.

73 Robert G. Weisbord: *Ebony Kinship: Africa, Africans, and the Afro-American*, Westport, CT and London 1973; S.K.B. Asante: *Pan-African Protest: West Africa and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1934–1941*, London 1977; Cedric J. Robinson: *The African Diaspora and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, in: *Race and Class* 27:2 (1985), pp. 61–62; James E. Genova: *The Empire Within: The Colonial Popular Front in France, 1934–1938*, in: *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 26:2 (2001), pp. 175–209; Jonathan Derrick: *Africa’s*

was evident that neither communist parties nor organisations or platforms were taking the lead in organising a global campaign against the Italian aggression. On 22 August 1935, an international conference to coordinate the Ethiopian campaign took place in Paris, sponsored by *Etoile Nord-Africaine* and the *Ligue de la Défense de la Race Nègré*; neither the French communists nor the ITUCNW participated in the conference.<sup>74</sup>

Huiswoud's attempt to establish the ITUCNW as the vanguard for the 'Hands off Abyssinia' campaign in the African Atlantic came to an abrupt end in autumn 1935. African American activists and organisations like the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP) started to publicly question the silence in Moscow.<sup>75</sup> However, the biggest blow to Huiswoud and his campaign was George Padmore's article in the NAACP-mouthpiece *The Crisis* about the betrayal of the anti-imperialist cause by the Soviet Union and its failure to condemn the Italian aggression at the *League of Nations*.<sup>76</sup> Arnold Ward, secretary of the London-based *Negro Welfare Association* and Huiswoud's close ally, anxiously reported that "G.P.'s article on Abyssinia in the *Crisis* is well read among Negroes [in the UK] and you can well judge for yourself it has done us a lot of harm," and criticised the Communist Party of Great Britain, the *League Against Imperialism* and the *World Movement Against War and Fascism* for their inactivity.<sup>77</sup> In autumn 1935, Huiswoud must have felt that the ITUCNW was losing its momentum and had to admit that its Ethiopian campaign had failed. The deathblow to his campaign came when *The Crisis*, in an editorial in October 1935, denounced Soviet hypocrisy and charged the Soviet Union with selling wheat and coal to Italy for use in the war in Ethiopia.<sup>78</sup> The news travelled all around the African Atlantic with the result that many, if not most, black activists broke with the communist parties and organisations.<sup>79</sup>

'Agitators': Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918–1939, London 2008, pp. 333–337.

- 74 James E. Genova: *The Empire Within: The Colonial Popular Front in France, 1934–1938*, p. 187.
- 75 See further: J. Calvitt Clarke III: *Italy, Russia, Japan, Ethiopia, and the War of 1935–6*, paper presented to the Third Pan-European International Relations Conference and Joint Meeting with The International Studies Association, Vienna, Austria, September 16–19, 1998.
- 76 George Padmore: *Ethiopia and World Politics*, in: *The Crisis* 42 (5 May 1935), pp. 138–139. See further J. Calvitt Clarke III: *Alliance of the Colored People: Ethiopia and Japan before World War II*, p. 107; J. Calvitt Clarke III: *Soviet Appeasement, Collective Security and the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935 and 1936*, pp. 271–272.
- 77 Letter from W[ard] to [Otto Huiswoud], 26.6.1935, RGASPI 495/155/102, fol. 15.
- 78 *Soviet Russia Aids Italy*, in: *The Crisis* 42:10 (October 1935). On the sanctions and Soviet shipment of oil, see J. Calvitt Clarke III: *Soviet Appeasement, Collective Security and the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935 and 1936*, pp. 279–284.
- 79 J. Calvitt Clarke III: *Italy, Russia, Japan, Ethiopia, and the War of 1935–6*; Christian Høgsbjerg: *Mariner, Renegade and Castaway: Chris Braithwaite: Seamen's Organiser, Socialist and Militant Pan-Africanist*, London 2014, p. 101–102.

## The Seventh *Comintern* Congress, the ‘Popular Front’ Tactics and Ethiopia

The first official comments of the *Comintern* on the Ethiopian crisis came at the time of the (non-communist) international conference on Ethiopia in Paris. The first response was a vague and half-hearted one by Palmiro Togliatti, who presented a report on the war preparations of the imperialist powers at the Seventh World Congress of the *Comintern* on 10–11 August 1935. According to him, Japanese imperialism and German fascism were the main advocates of war. Togliatti also attacked Italian imperialism, shortly touched upon the threat of an Italian invasion of Ethiopia and made a passionate declaration of solidarity with the Ethiopian people.<sup>80</sup> The resolution on Togliatti’s report concluded that Mussolini’s impending invasion of Ethiopia was creating a new tension in relations between the imperialist powers—echoing the position of Soviet foreign policy rather than articulating a clear-cut condemnation of Italy and a call to rally to the Ethiopian cause.<sup>81</sup>

In late August, the *Comintern* issued the “Declaration of Support for Abyssinia” and sent it to the communist parties of Italy, France, Great Britain, USA, South Africa, Cuba, Brazil, Panama and Portugal.<sup>82</sup> These were the first official instructions sent by Moscow, clearing the way for the application of a ‘united front’ policy in the Ethiopian campaign. Still, no official statement had been forthcoming and a representative of the British Party inquired whether the ECCI was going to issue it, or whether the European parties were supposed to issue a joint one?<sup>83</sup> Following Jonathan Haslam, at this point—if not earlier—a kind of tactical division of labour in the engagement of the *Comintern* and the communist parties had been outlined. While the Italian Communist Party, which had protested against fascist aggression under the banner of the “Hands off Abyssinia” campaign already in February 1935, was to agitate on Ethiopia, the French Party was to mobilise the leading European socialist parties into a unified platform of solidarity. The *Comintern*, however, would not be officially engaged. A conference was organised in Paris in early September, and a resolution was passed calling on the *League of Nations* to take energetic measures in defence of Ethiopian independence.<sup>84</sup>

However, behind the curtains, the *Comintern* headquarters had started to work on the Ethiopian crisis. Palmiro Togliatti’s Secretariat was ordered to prepare a report on the issue after the Seventh Congress. The ECCI Presidium discussed Togliatti’s report on 26

80 Aldo Agosti: Palmiro Togliatti: A Biography, London and New York 2008, pp. 100–102.

81 E. H. Carr: The Twilight of the Comintern 1930–1935, Basingstoke 1982, pp. 413–416.

82 Declaration of Support for Abyssinia, 28.8.1935, RGASPI 495/14/60, fol. 22–25.

83 (Intercepted) Telegram No. 97 from West to Secretariat, 11 September 1935, published in Nigel West: MASK, p. 80.

84 Jonathan Haslam: The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–39, pp. 64–65.

September 1935.<sup>85</sup> A few days earlier, the ECCI Secretariat had published an appeal by Dimitrov to form a united front with the *Second International* to prevent the escalation of the conflict into a new world war.<sup>86</sup> Also, instructions were sent to the British Party ordering them to establish contacts with the French Party in order to launch a broad public campaign along the ‘popular front’ doctrine, i.e., aiming to include the British Labour Party, the Socialist League and the Independent Labour Party.<sup>87</sup>

Dimitrov’s invitation to the *Second International* was met with silence. A second call was sent to London a few days after the Italian attack on Ethiopia in early October.<sup>88</sup> Similar appeals for a united front against Italian imperialism were made by the *League Against Imperialism* and the *World Committee Against War and Fascism*.<sup>89</sup> All in vain, the *Second International* was not interested in a unified campaign instigated by the communists. Throughout the world, the communists received similar negative responses to their calls for unified ‘Hands Off Abyssinia’ campaigns. In Australia, for example, the Communist Party had invited various political parties, the churches, and other organisations to joint mass demonstrations but at least the official reaction from the churches was a negative one.<sup>90</sup> Officially, the Australian Labour Party adhered to the isolationist and appeasement policies of the Australian government although some reformist politicians and union activists did join the ranks of the anti-war campaign of the Communist Party of Australia.<sup>91</sup> In South Africa, too, most of the churches rejected the invitation to join the *Hands off Abyssinia Committee*, an initiative that was criticised by the local Trotskyists for being a platform applying the “usual principles of broad People’s Front, that is to say, without principles.”<sup>92</sup> In Sweden, to take a European example, the popular manifestations

85 Aldo Agosti: Palmiro Togliatti: A Biography, p. 104.

86 Telegram from the ECCI Secretariat to the LSI Secretariat on the Danger of War in Abyssinia, 23.9.1935, in Degras (ed.): *The Communist International*, p. 378.

87 (Intercepted) Telegram Nos. 380–383 from Peter and Ercoli [Togliatti], 22 September 1935, published in West: MASK, p. 165.

88 Telegram from the ECCI Secretariat to the LSI Secretariat 7.10.1935, in Degras: Document Vol. III, p. 378.

89 R. Bridgeman: Statement by the League Against Imperialism and for National Independence for the Defence of the Independence and Territorial Integrity of Ethiopia, 8.10.1935, RGASPI 542/1/62, fol. 62–63; Fisher: Romain Rolland, p. 204.

90 “Hands Off.” Churches reply to Communist Invitation, in: *Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday 27 September 1935, p. 11.

91 Robert Bozinovski: *The Communist Party of Australia and Proletarian Internationalism, 1928–1945*, PhD thesis, Victoria University, Australia, April 2008, pp. 183–184.

92 People’s Front and the Cry for Unity in South Africa, in: *The Spark* 2, 4 April 1936, published in: Allison Drew (ed.): *South Africa’s Radical Tradition: A Documentary History, Volume One 1907–1950*, at: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/south-africas-radical-tradition-documentary-history-volume-one-1907-1950-allison-drew>, Document 89 (accessed on 18 April 2017).

and demonstrations in support of Ethiopia were organised by the church organisations, labour unions, women federations and peace movements in contrast to the communists who played a marginal role, if any at all.<sup>93</sup>

## The ISH and the ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ Campaign

The silence in Moscow during the escalation of the Ethiopian crisis in 1935 also affected the actions and activities of the ISH. Having been one of the core units in organising anti-war cells among radical harbour workers and seamen during previous anti-imperialist campaigns before 1933, the ISH Secretariat responded to the Italian aggression at an early stage and issued a call for a unified front of workers in February/March 1935. Like the previous ‘Hands off Manchuria/China’ campaigns, the ISH call was not an inclusive one as it stressed the need to defend the “Abyssinian people” and not “Abyssinia”, i.e., the emperor and the prevailing political system.<sup>94</sup>

It is likely that the ISH Secretariat had received orders from the *Comintern* headquarters to link up with the *World Committee Against War and Fascism* and to receive instructions for the coordination of the ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ campaign. Anticipating these instructions, the ISH Secretariat issued a call for a ‘united front’ against Italian fascism and imperialism in March 1935.<sup>95</sup> However, no such instructions were forthcoming which negatively affected the planning of the activities of the ISH.<sup>96</sup> Consequently, local anti-war agitation in the harbours and on board the ships was never organised and the ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ campaign never took off in spring 1935.<sup>97</sup>

The ISH Secretariat started to plan for a new campaign after the Seventh World Congress of the *Comintern* in August 1935. It launched a call for an international boycott of Italian vessels and shipments of war equipment to Italy in September 1935. The ISH even tried to invite the ITF to join the campaign on 21 September 1935 but failed miserably as the ITF refused to recognise the ISH as an equal partner.<sup>98</sup>

93 Lars Folke Berge: Den bortglömda Afrikasolidariteten: Svenska manifestationer inför det Italiensk-etiopiska kriget 1935–36, in: Urban Claesson/Dick Åhman (eds.): Kulturell reproduktion i skola och nation: En vänbok till Lars Petterson, Möklinta 2016, pp. 149–168.

94 ISH: Ein neuer Krieg steht unmittelbar bevor: Kriegsmobilisierung Italiens gegen Abessinien (no date but likely written in February/March 1935), RGASPI 534/5/242, fol. 59–60.

95 L.I.M.D. pour l’unité d’action dans la lutte contre guerre, in: La Correspondence Internationale 30–31 (13.IV.1935), RGASPI 495/20, 858, fol. 491–493.

96 Adolf [Shelley] an Herrn Alexander [Losovsky], 3.4.1935, RGASPI 534/5/242, fol. 109.

97 Report by Henri [Luigi Polano], André [Adolf Deter] and Ad[olf Shelly] on the activities of the ISH in 1935, January 1936, RGASPI 534/5/245, fol. 12–13.

98 Tillon to Gen[osse] Jusofowitsch, 12.10.35, RGASPI 534/5/243, fol. 116, RGASPI 534/5/243, fol. 173–177. On the non-engagement of the ITF in the Abyssinia campaign,

The ISH call for an international boycott had a global circulation. However, it was not the ISH that initiated local boycotts on a global scale. In Trinidad, for example, the *Longshore Workers' Branch* of the Trinidad Labour Party had started its activities before they were contacted by the ISH Secretariat and were asked to join a world-wide boycott of Italian ships. The union members decided to back the ISH boycott and even issued a declaration to this effect in the *Trinidad Guardian* on 25 October 1935.<sup>99</sup>

The ISH Secretariat issued a new call for international unified cooperation when Italian troops commenced their attack on Ethiopia in early October 1935. The call, which was published in the magazines of the national sections of the ISH, stressed the need for a global blockade of shipments of war material to the Italian troops. This blockade was to be organised by the transport workers in the harbours and by the ship crews. Nonetheless, the vocabulary of the text echoed the communist position: global support was demanded in defence of the "Abyssinian people" and its "war of liberation" as well as for the defence of "world peace."<sup>100</sup>

The October 1935 call of the ISH was in part a response to local actions in Europe and Africa. The crew on board of five Greek ships had launched a strike in protest against shipments of war material for Italian troops. Harbour workers in Alexandria (Egypt), Cape Town and Durban (South Africa), Bombay (India) and Marseilles (France) had refused to load Italian ships. None of these activities, it seems, had been coordinated by the ISH Secretariat but by local committees and activists. However, they were referred to in the ISH call as examples of what could and should be done and the ISH Secretariat used these events in its campaign slogans.<sup>101</sup> Similar strikes and boycotts were organised in the USA (San Pedro), the United Kingdom (Cardiff; London), France (Port Sant-Louis-Du-Rhone; Marseilles), Belgium (Antwerp), Greece (Piraeus), Egypt (Port Said), Algeria (Bone) and Southwest Africa/Namibia (Lüderitz Bay). Although listed in the ISH magazines, they had either been organised by local anti-war committees, sections of trade unions or ship crews that had few, if any, links with the ISH Secretariat.<sup>102</sup>

see Willy Buschak: *Edo Fimmen: Der schöne Traum von Europa und die Globalisierung*, Essen 2002, p. 188.

99 Correspondence between the ISH Secretariat to the Secretary of the Stevedores' and Longshore Workers' Branch of the Trinidad Labour Party, 24.9.1935, reply from Trinidad, 6.11.1935, RGASPI 534/5/243, fol. 156–160.

100 Rädga freden... Upprop från ISH till alla världens sjötransportarbetare, in: *Hamn- och Sjöproletären* 10–11 (1935), p. 6.

101 List of slogans, RGASPI 534/5/243, fol. 184.

102 Internationellt, in: *Hamn- och Sjöproletären* 1 (1936), p. 10; *Sjötransportarbetarnas kamp mot det italienska kriget i Abessinien*, in: *Hamn- och Sjöproletären* 4 (1936), p. 3.

## The Fate of the ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ Campaign

The activities of the ISH reflected the state of affairs within the *Comintern* in 1935 and its failure to position itself as the spearhead of the ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ campaign. Plans for an amalgamation of the ISH and the ITF were already discussed among high-ranking RILU and *Comintern* officials in 1934 as part of a revision of the ‘class-against-class’ doctrine. Officially, the ISH was not to be liquidated but its global activities were to be revised. In the USA, the United Kingdom and in France, the national sections of the ISH were dismantled and its members joined the national unions. The ISH Secretariat, on the other hand, was ordered to establish contacts with the ITF headquarters.<sup>103</sup> Consequently, the former global structures of the ISH were barely existent during the escalation of the Ethiopian crisis in 1935. Although the ISH Secretariat repeatedly tried to launch international campaigns, few of its calls resulted in any coordinated actions. The ITF refusal of cooperation in September and October 1935 was the final deathblow to the ISH.<sup>104</sup>

Nevertheless, the ISH Secretariat continued its campaign and issued calls for a boycott of Italian ships throughout the autumn of 1935. At this point, however, the campaign had developed—once again—into a general campaign against the imperialist war. This situation was reflected in its call for a campaign to support unified action against Japanese and Italian imperialism in early January 1936. The lingering fear of an assault on the Soviet Union was evident and the members of the national sections of the ISH were urged to stop the transportation of war materials to the Horn of Africa.<sup>105</sup>

Whether the ISH appeal of January 1936 had any impact is doubtful. Only few of its national sections still existed at this point and effective actions were limited to a few port cities in Europe. Even the ISH leadership had to admit that their appeal had no effect.<sup>106</sup> When the Italian troops entered Addis Ababa in May 1936, the ISH had been silent for over five months.

103 See further Holger Weiss: *The International of Seamen and Harbour Workers: A Radical Global Labour Union of the Waterfront or a Subversive World-Wide Web?*, pp. 305–310.

104 ISH: *For the Unity of the Transport Workers in the Struggle Against War – Correspondence between the ISH and the ITF regarding Mussolini’s attack on Abyssinia*, December 1935, RGASPI 534/5/243, fol. 173–177.

105 *Einheitsaktion gegen den japanischen Imperialismus*, 3.1.1936, RGASPI 534/5/245, fol. 1–3.

106 *Bericht über die Internationalen Seeleuteklubs und einige Vorschläge zu ihrer weiteren Tätigkeit*, 31.3.1936, RGASPI 534/5/245, fol. 107–117.



## Concluding Reflections

Neither the ‘Hands off China’ nor the ‘Hands off Abyssinia’ campaigns of the *Comintern* and *Profintern* and their affiliated organisations notably affected the outcome of the Manchurian crisis in 1932/1933 or the Ethiopian crisis in 1935/1936. Their main drawback was that they were communist-run operations and therefore had received little backing from non-communist activists, including the socialist/social democratic parties or the reformist trade union leadership. This fact was already recognised in the various self-critical analyses conducted by the communist parties and labour unions. As long as the ‘class-against-class’ doctrine prevailed, a change in tactics was never considered. While both campaigns were part and parcel of the anti-fascist and anti-imperialist rhetoric of the *Comintern/Profintern*, the prime task was to mobilise the workers of the work for the defence of the ‘Fatherland of the Proletariat’, i.e., the Soviet Union. Secondly, they endeavoured to unmask the social democratic parties and reformist trade union leadership as the enemies of the working class and as lackeys of the bourgeoisie, as well as supporters of capitalist exploitation of the proletariat. Branded as ‘social fascists’, any cooperation with the socialists/social democrats/reformists during the campaigns was therefore out of the question; instead, the rank and file of the mainstream leftist parties were called to join communist directed activities and demonstrations. Not surprisingly, the communist invitations were without exception either disregarded or rejected by the socialist/social democrat/reformist leadership party and trade union leadership as they were suspected of being a mere attempt at agitation and promotion of a world revolution by Moscow.

On the other hand, the Manchurian crisis, in a sense, was a test case for the *Comintern* and its organisations on how to organise and run a global campaign provided that the crisis was to be interpreted as a conflict that could develop into a new world war and an attack on the Soviet Union. Of equal importance were strategic and tactical matters, namely the position of the *Comintern* in Soviet security policy and the capacity of the *Comintern* ‘Solar System’ to react. However, the Nazi takeover in Germany in 1933 and the changes in Soviet foreign policy in 1934 were to have a devastating impact on the capacity of the *Comintern* and its organisations to engage in the Ethiopian crisis of 1935. The final consequence was a negative one: while the communists had been at the forefront of organising international campaigns against Japanese imperialism in 1931/32, their ambition to launch new campaigns under the banner of the ‘united front’ tactics that had been endorsed at the Seventh World Congress of the *Comintern* in August 1935 failed miserably. Nevertheless, lessons were learnt and with a new conflict arising in Spain, communist anti-fascist campaigns calling for a ‘united front’ had a positive outcome, resulting, among other things, in the establishment of the *International Brigades*.

A final observation—which could not be developed in the article and deserves to be investigated in future studies—concerns the intricate relationship between the anti-fascist/anti-imperialist doctrine of the *Comintern* and the agenda(s) of Soviet foreign

policy. Both the *Comintern* and the *Profintern* claimed to be staunch opponents of fascism and proponents of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. However, this was not the case with Soviet foreign security policy which aimed to achieve a rapprochement with both Imperialist (Japan, Britain, France) and Fascist (Italy, Nazi-Germany) powers during the first half of the 1930s. The silence in Moscow and the continuation of Soviet foreign trade with Italy during the Ethiopian crisis marked the end of a schizophrenic condition as well as the bankruptcy of the anti-colonialist/anti-imperialist dogma of the *Comintern*. It took more than a decade for Moscow to return to the 'Third World' and formulate a (new) anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist dogma.

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