On Strike Against the Nazis

By Steve Cushion and Merilyn Moos

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Class Struggle and Resistance in Northern France and Belgium during the Second World War
By *Steve Cushion*

The International Transport Workers' Federation and Working Class Resistance to the Nazis
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Front cover illustration: Working in the Mines under Nazi Occupation, Liévin, Pas-de-Calais, 1941

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This publication is dedicated to the volunteers who run the hundreds of municipal *Musées de la Résistance* and other local archives throughout France and Belgium.

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On Strike Against the Nazis

The class struggle did not disappear during the Second World War following the occupation of much of Europe by the German armed forces, a fact barely recognised today as the history of the resistance has been nationalised and has become the founding myth of the French Republic, rather as the myths of Dunkirk and the Blitz are used in Britain. Yet, equally, the presence of a Nazi army of occupation with the enthusiastic collaboration of a home-grown fascist administration could not be ignored by working class militants.

In northern France and Belgium, a shop steward-based movement quickly emerged, mainly led by Communist activists, that attempted to defend and advance wages and conditions and, above all, access to sufficient food for working class families. In so doing, they organised an impressive series of strikes that involved nearly a quarter of a million workers and won some significant material gains although at the cost of severe repression with many activists being killed in prison or while resisting arrest. A significant number of these militants, when on the run from the forces of repression, fought back with armed attacks and sabotage. The hunted became the hunters.

This pamphlet will examine the connection between the class struggle and anti-fascist politics as well as the relationship between mass action and the armed struggle under a repressive regime. In so doing, we shall attempt to add a discussion of class into the historiography of the Second World War, which, with a few exceptions, is dominated by an analysis based on an assumptions of patriotism and class collaboration, which explains the Nazis and other fascists as representing "evil", without looking for the class interests they represented.[1]

After the war, General de Gaulle was at pains to create the myth of himself as Head of the Free French, a myth that defined a member of the resistance as being someone who supported the General. However, during the first year or so of the occupation, the reconstruction of working class organisation was, in itself, an act of resistance. Each attempt to build workplace committees, every underground newspaper or leaflet and particularly every strike collided head on with the reality of the German occupation and native fascism.

Starting in northern France, this publication will examine the particularities of the region that propelled the local working class Communists into active anti-Nazi activity well before the Communist party leadership saw any need for active resistance to the occupation. Moving over the border, the first big strike by miners and engineers in the region was in Belgium, the "strike of 100,000". This was quickly followed by a similarly

[1] Some alternative interpretations of the conflict as a whole available in English are:
Gluckstein, Donny, *A People's History of the Second World War: Resistance Versus Empire*, London: Pluto, 2012.
Bambery, Chris, *The Second World War, A Marxist History*, London: Pluto, 2014.
Heartfield, James, *Unpatriotic History of the Second World War*, Alresford: Zero Books, 2012.
Mandel, Ernest, *The Meaning of the Second World War*, London: Verso, 2011.

sized strike in the mines of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Given that both strikes were organised and led by Communist shop stewards, was there a direct connection, or was it that a similar situation produced a similar result? In either case, the role of women in both disputes was crucial to their relative success.

The invasion of the Soviet Union by the German armed forces radically altered the political map and led to workers in both northern France and Belgium taking up arms and beginning a campaign of sabotage. Here too there are interesting comparisons and contrasts between the two regions. Meanwhile the class struggle continued and we see the importance of a strong shop stewards' movement in both regions which was central to the organisation of exceptional industrial militancy.

While we have found no direct connection with these events, there was another anti-fascist trade union organisation in the region, the International Transport Federation's (ITF) work among German maritime and railway workers that was based in the Belgian port of Antwerp. While the wartime strikes of mine and metal workers were led by Communists, the ITF initiative, although based on shop steward organisation, was led by social democrats and full-time trade union officials, in itself a rarity worth further examination. The ITF also took its anti-fascism seriously enough to expend considerable organisational energy in support of the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. And here we come full circle as many of the activists who led both the strikes and the armed struggle in France and Belgium were veterans of that conflict.

This history is worth exploring for its own sake as a People's History, as Howard Zinn said: "History should emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past when people showed their ability to resist, to join together, and occasionally win". But more than that, a fresh look at the nature of the Second World War is timely, particularly one that challenges the nationalistic orthodoxy and attempts an internationalist, class-based analysis.

Class Struggle and Resistance in Northern France and Belgium during the Second World War

By *Steve Cushion*

The northern French region, the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, along with neighbouring Belgium is not, at first sight, well placed for underground military resistance. It is so flat that local people jokingly refer to the slag heaps at the pit heads as "the mountains". Traditional guerrilla warfare was not possible. Nevertheless, during the Second World War, militants of the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF - French Communist Party) and the *Parti Communiste de Belgique* (PCB) / *Kommunistische Partij van België* (KPB, Communist Party of Belgium) built a formidable anti-fascist organisation and led a campaign of military, economic and political resistance against the Nazi occupying forces and their French and Belgian fascist allies.

This movement emerged from mass strikes in 1941 in the coal-fields of northern France and moved on to urban guerrilla warfare as militant miners were forced to go on the run at the end of the strike. A class war of smaller skirmishes, which spread to other industries, continued for the rest of the war, with another big miners' strike in 1943. The militancy of the northern French miners led the local Communist party activists to oppose the German occupation long before this became the national Communist party line as the workers of the region quickly realised that, if they were to defend their wages and conditions, they would not only need to fight their employers, but also the German army and the French collaborationist state.

But the Nord-Pas-de-Calais was not the only region to witness massive strike waves. Nineteen forty-one also saw a strike of 70,000 miners and steelworkers in the Liège region of Belgium, following a city-wide general strike in Amsterdam. However, despite the close proximity of northern France and Belgium, there were significant differences in the evolution of the class struggle in the two regions. We shall trace that evolution and highlight the differences, offering some possible explanations for the divergences.

The overwhelming majority of the acts of resistance to the Nazis and their collaborators in occupied Europe came from working class people, while the ruling class, with a few honourable exceptions, made handsome profits from supplying the German war machine. Nevertheless, most conventional histories of the war leave organised labour completely out of the picture. It is not our intention to view this history through such a nationalistic lens. Rather we wish to examine the way in which the workers of the region responded to the oppressive regime run by an alliance of Nazi Germany, the fascist Vichy government and greedy French employers.

We shall also examine the relationship between mass, class-based action and the working class involvement in the armed struggle. As most of the working class resistance

in northern France and Belgium was organised by Communists, it seems appropriate to adopt a periodisation that takes account of international events that had an effect on Communist politics.

Northern France

The invasion of 1940 was not the first such incursion for northern France; German soldiers had previously occupied the region in 1870-71 and again in 1914-18. During the First World War, the front-line had cut the region in two, with the Germans controlling the eastern half, which suffered a repressive occupation, while the western part had remained in Anglo-French hands and had warmly welcomed British, Canadian and Indian troops. These experiences had affected the region deeply and had given rise to patriotic and Anglophile sentiments while, at the same time, developing widespread anti-German hostility. Communist militants were not immune to these sentiments and were, therefore, much more likely to resist the occupying forces than their comrades elsewhere in France.

The Nord-Pas-de-Calais was an industrial region, where the economy was based on engineering, textiles and, above all, coal mining. The majority of the population had always voted for the left and, in 1936, had expressed strong support for the government of Léon Blum and the Popular Front. The failure of this reformist alliance had resulted in mutual recriminations and left a well of bitterness between the social democratic SFIO (*Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière*, French Section of the Workers' International) and the PCF (*Parti Communiste français*, French Communist Party).

The high level of industrialisation had attracted a large number of immigrants, principally Poles, Belgians and Italians, who formed well established communities in the region. While all these immigrants were in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais to seek work, many of the Italians were, in reality, refugees from Mussolini's fascism and were drawn towards the Communist party. As far as the Poles were concerned, the invasion of their homeland in 1939 had given them a good reason to hate the Nazis. These two communities would furnish a goodly number of activists for the resistance during the following years as they already had a good understanding of the fascist menace that was in the process of conquering the whole of Europe. Italy and Germany had already seen the triumph of the fascists, as well as Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria, Romania and, after the capitulation of the British and French governments at Munich on 30 September 1938, Czechoslovakia.

Spain had resisted heroically, but in 1939 the civil war ended badly for the anti-fascist forces, despite the support of the volunteers of the International Brigades. These anti-fascist fighters came to Spain from all the countries of Europe and the Americas, but the biggest contingent consisted of French volunteers, a large number of whom came from the

Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Their military experience would be extremely important during the early days of the resistance.

Unity from Below

However, Spain was not the only country where the working class resisted fascism. In France, the extreme right wing leagues, *Action Française*, *Jeunesses Patriotes* and the *Croix-de-feu* had attempted an anti-democratic coup on 6 February 1934. This failed in the face of a united working class mobilisation on 9 February and a general strike was called on the 12th by the reformist *Confédération Générale du Travail*, (CGT, General Confederation of Labour), which was loosely associated to the SFIO and the Communist-led *Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire* (CGTU United General Confederation of Labour). The SFIO and the PCF both decided to call for separate demonstrations on the day, but the rank and file of both parties defied their leaders and joined into one giant demonstration. This unity from below both paved the way for the reforms of the Popular Front government of 1936-38 and forced the trade union leaders to unite the movement. The reunified CGT became a powerful weapon in the hands of a militant working class.

Nevertheless, the leadership of this trade union federation continued to be divided into two factions, the "*confédérés*", moderate reformists allied to the SFIO and the Communist faction, the "*unitaires*". This cohabitation lasted until August 1939, when the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics[2] freed Hitler's hands to order the attack Poland. This set in motion the Second World War, the first months of which were known as the "Phoney War". On 18 September, the *Bureau Confédéral*, the leading committee of the CGT, voted to expel those militants who refused to condemn the German-Soviet pact. This had the effect of expelling the Communists from the CGT. More than 600 local unions are dissolved and many excluded activists and leaders are arrested. Many of those who are not arrested or mobilized into the army went into hiding.

The Forbidden Zone

In May 1940, the German Army launched a devastating attack on France, in the face of which the French government quickly sued for peace. The French parliament then voted full power to Marshal Philippe Pétain, who established a collaborationist, fascist state based in the spa town of Vichy, with nominal control of the south of the country.

The Nord-Pas-de-Calais was the scene of fierce fighting and the population witnessed the massacre of both civilians and prisoners of war by the German army, as well as suffering widespread material destruction. The occupation which followed this defeat was extremely oppressive, with the presence of large numbers of German soldiers because of the proximity to the Channel. The German authorities created a second demarcation line and the Nord-Pas-de-Calais was declared to be the *Zone Interdite* (Forbidden Zone) to

[2] Also known as the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

which those French people who had fled the invading German army were forbidden to return. It was governed by the military commander in Brussels in preparation for its future annexation to an enlarged Third Reich.

Local administration was the responsibility of *Oberfeldkommandantur 670* (OFK 670), with its headquarters in the Lille Chamber of Commerce. OFK 670 had its own autonomous organisation to control the economy, which it administered in the interests of the German war machine, without any interference either from the Vichy government or the occupation authorities in Paris. The *Préfet*[3], Fernand Carles, and the French *gendarmes* under his command collaborated fully with this new arrangement.

It was in such unfavourable circumstances that working class militants had to start their resistance activities.

Early Days

The Pact

The Hitler-Stalin Pact of 23 August 1939 caused considerable confusion in the ranks of the PCF, but the Paris leadership came round very quickly to supporting Stalin's position, the foundation of which was the analysis that the forthcoming war would be between two rival imperialisms. The French government, which had itself recently signed its own agreement with Hitler at Munich in September 1938 and which had hoped that this would allow for war between Germany and the USSR, used the pact as a good excuse to make the PCF a scapegoat. The arrest and imprisonment of party officials and parliamentary deputies swiftly followed the order banning the PCF and closing its daily newspaper, *l'Humanité*.

In the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the *Préfet* removed the Communist trade union delegates from office and installed members of the SFIO in their place while, at the same time, the CGT expelled Communist activists from their union positions. The employers profited from the divisions to discharge many Communist militants as trouble-makers. The PCF lost a great deal of the influence that they had managed to build up during the period of the Popular Front. Auguste Lecœur, Félix Cadras and René Camphin, three well known Communist militants in the coal mining basin, published a leaflet justifying the pact in the name of the departmental leadership of the PCF and signed it with their own names. This resulted in their arrest and conscription into front line army units. When war broke out, they were captured and made prisoners of war, but they quickly made their escape and returned to Northern France where they would play an important part in the resistance.[4]

[3] Civil Governor of the Department.
[4] Pannequin, Roger, *Ami si tu tombes*, Le Sagittaire, Paris, 1976 p.40.

After the fall of France, some Communist leaders in Paris, as an implementation of their policy of neutrality between German and British imperialisms, engaged in unsuccessful negotiations with the occupation authorities in a bid to secure the legal publication of *l'Humanité*.[5] A similar move was started in Lille in an attempt to relaunch the regional Communist paper, *L'Enchaîné du Nord*, but internal opposition quickly caused this approach to be abandoned.[6]

For Julien the Struggle Continues

At the beginning of the occupation, Julien Hapiot was head of the *Jeunesse Communiste* (Communist Youth) in the Pas-de-Calais. Veteran of the International Brigades in Spain, he was practically the sole Communist leader in the region to remain at liberty while the others were still prisoners of war. While awaiting his comrades to escape from the POW camps, he started to reorganise the PCF underground, particularly the OS (*Organisation Spéciale*, Special Organisation), action squads that had their origins protecting street corner orators and guarding party leaders during the period of illegality after September 1939. The OS rapidly became the armed wing of the Communist movement.

Auguste Lecœur

Despite the Hitler-Stalin pact, Communist resistance started very quickly in the Pas-de-Calais. The particular circumstances of the Forbidden Zone allowed for an independence of action that Auguste Lecœur and Julien Hapiot were able to take maximum advantage of. They decided, in August 1940, to begin organising illegal Communist activity against the occupying forces.[7] An underground edition of *l'Humanité* was being produced in Paris without a word against the Germans, so Lecœur and Hapiot decided that it would be better to produce their own local agitational material. For Paris, it was necessary to organise within the conditions imposed by a German victory and thus the principal struggle was against French capitalism and the Vichy government. On the other hand, many of the comrades in the north were of the opinion that the war would end in a revolution similar to 1917 in Russia, a revolution that would come out of the defeat of German fascism. For them, the French economy was weak and would be weakened still further to the advantage of German capitalism, while the French

[5] Tillon, Charles, *On Chantait Rouge*, Laffont, Paris, 1977 p.320.
[6] Segond, Alain, *La Presse Clandestine Communiste*, Mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Lille 3, 1973.
[7] Pannequin, *Ami si tu tombes*, p.129.

bourgeoisie would be bought off as they made monstrous profits by exploiting French workers mercilessly. Julien Hapiot thought that: "It is much better to shoot the master rather than shoot the dog".[8] Moreover, for the veterans of the Spanish civil war there was a sentiment that they had a score to settle, that the same struggle was continuing.

Thus, the Communists of the Pas-de-Calais began their anti-German propaganda very early on. Nevertheless, the Communists of the region did not think of themselves as disloyal to their party and their confidence in the Soviet Union was as strong as ever, it was simply that the daily reality of the Forbidden Zone pushed then more rapidly to a more anti-German position than their comrades elsewhere.

Throughout the autumn of 1940, small groups went out to search for arms and explosives that had been abandoned during the retreat of the French army. Not with any specific purpose in mind, but sure in the knowledge that these munitions would be useful at some stage in the future[9].

On 22 April 1941, *L'Enchaîné*, the Communist newspaper of the Pas-de-Calais, called, for "a day of unity and action against the capitalist exploiters, the collaborators and the *boches*".[10] On the morning of 1 May, the German soldiers awoke to discover red flags and tricolours everywhere, on electric pylons, pit-head winding gear, anywhere that it was difficult to remove them. But it was not just a question of propaganda.

Arson attacks also began to be organised, some of which were spectacular, like the fire in the German lorry depot at Vimy, started by Julien Hapiot and Stanislas Szymczak in April 1941[11]. However, such attacks were still rare, partly because of the national party line and, more importantly for the activists, the priority was building the underground organisation. As a result, the most important working class militant activity before the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 took place in the mines of northern France. But before we come to the big strike in the Pas-de-Calais, we need to look at a couple of forerunners.

Holland - Strike! Strike! Strike!

In early 1941, the German authorities made plans to send shipyard and engineering workers from Amsterdam-Noord to serve as forced labour to build German ships in Hamburg. A strike in the shipyards forced them to abandon these plans and only volunteers were sent. The success of this action encouraged militant workers to believe that further strikes could be successful.

[8] Dejonghe Étienne. "Les Communistes dans le Nord/Pas-de-Calais de juin 1940 à la veille de la grève des mineurs". In: *Revue du Nord*, tome 68, n°270, July-September 1986. p.689.
[9] Angeli Claude et Paul Gillet, dans Rémy, *La Résistance dans le Nord*, Famot, Genève, 1974, p.122.
[10] Segond, Alain, *La Presse Clandestine Communiste*, Mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Lille 3, 1973.
[11] Pannequin, *Ami si tu tombes*, p.96.

The National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands (NSB) actively collaborated with the Nazi invaders and grew in the course of the war to become proportionately one of the biggest fascist movements in Europe per head of population. The *Weerbaarheidsafdeling* (WA), the NSB's paramilitary wing, targeted and harassed Jews. Many Jewish workers in Amsterdam were skilled diamond cutters with strong trade union organisation and their links with other unionised workers would be important in building resistance.

On 11 February 1941, about fifty WA members marched through Amsterdam to Waterlooplein, a neighbourhood where many Jews lived, putting up signs saying 'No Jews Allowed' as well as vandalising the old Jewish quarter. In response, Dutch opponents of the occupation, both Jews and others, created *knokploegen*, self-defence groups that became involved in violent confrontations with the WA. In one of these fights, WA member Hendrik Koot was wounded and died a few days later. In response, the Germans temporarily closed off the Jewish quarter. On 19 February, a massive fight broke out in the Jewish ice-cream parlour Koko after the police tried to enter but were confronted with a *knokploegen* self-defence unit from the neighbourhood, injuring several officers

The Germans used the incidents as an excuse for the first round-ups of Jews. On 22 and 23 February 1941, 425 young Jewish men were rounded up, beaten and taken away. To resist this growing German repression the Communist Party of the Netherlands (CPN) held an open air meeting at the Noordermarkt. There, they discussed how to stop the persecution of the Jews and the institution of forced labour. The 250 people present decided to call a strike. On Tuesday 25 February, the tram workers went on strike, while dockers and shipyard workers walked out in Amsterdam Noord and marched across the river. The strike spread to other trades and the strikers marched through the streets, calling on people to join in.[12]

Journalist Salomon de Vries wrote in his diary:

> *The news ran round through the city. The Amsterdam Dry-dock Company, the shipbuilding industry, Vries Lenz, Fokker - they're on strike everywhere! The ferryboats aren't running! The trams aren't running!*

Mientje Meijer worked in a clothing factory. Her husband was one of the organisers of the tram strike.

> *I kept walking to the window. Finally I saw him, and he nodded. I could feel my heart freeze. I looked into the shop and saw all those girls and the boss. I wasn't at all accustomed to speaking before a group. I said, "Ladies, all of Amsterdam has come to a standstill because they've been rounding up Jews and taking them away. We've got to join in". To my surprise everyone took to the streets. I thought, "now*

[12] Cole, Peter, *Strike!!! Strike!!! Strike!!! On This Day in 1941 Dutch Workers Said No to the Nazi Persecution of Dutch Jews*, 2018, History News Network.

I'm going to be sacked", but even the boss went along! We went to the Noordermarkt and the procession just kept growing. It was overwhelming".[13]

Over 300,000 workers in Amsterdam and Utrecht went on strike that day and the next in what was effectively a regional general strike. The Germans quickly responded with great ferocity, opening fire and throwing hand grenades, killing nine and wounding about thirty-five other demonstrators. The mayor was forced to resign and many city workers were sacked. Many Communists were arrested, some deported to Buchenwald and a handful executed.[14]

But news of this action quickly spread to neighbouring Belgium.

Belgium

Relations between the social democratic *Parti Ouvrier Belge* (POB, Belgian Workers' Party) and the *Parti Communiste de Belgique* (PCB) / *Kommunistische Partij van België* (KPB, Communist Party of Belgium) were never good. The POB refused to join the Communists in a Popular Front and the social gains of 1936 were the result of a general strike involving half a million workers, which forced the coalition government of the POB, the Catholics and the liberals to concede a 7% wage increase, 40 hour week, paid holidays of a minimum of 6 days a year, health insurance and an increase in family allowances. The Hitler-Stalin pact was the nail in the coffin of relations between the two parties as the PCB returned to denouncing the social democrats in terms reminiscent of the Third Period.

Following the German invasion, the POB split, with many of the leadership fleeing to London where they became part of the government in exile. The faction of the POB led by Henri de Man formed a government of collaboration, dissolved the party and helped set up the collaborationist replacement for the trade unions, the *Union des Travailleurs Manuels et Intellectuels* (UTMI, Union of Manual and Intellectual Workers). Some, but by no means all, of the bureaucracy of the trade union federation linked to the POB, *Confédération Générale du Travail de Belgique* (CGTB, General Confederation of Labour of Belgium), joined Man in his collaboration, but many refused. However, their previous experience did not lend itself to an easy transition to clandestine resistance and most of the old leadership who did not side with the Nazis restricted their activity to small discussion groups planning a better world after the end of the war. This left the field free for the PCB within the working class movement and, for many, justified their previous attacks on the POB leadership.

In January 1941, the central committee of the Communist Party of Belgium (*Parti Communiste de Belgique*, PCB) had started producing *Le Drapeau Rouge* (Red Flag) clandestinely. While formally supporting the Hitler-Stalin pact and placing the blame for

[13] Verzetsmuseum Resistance Museum, Amsterdam, *The February Strike.*
[14] My thanks to Mark Kilian for his helpful comments.

the war equally on Berlin and London, in its second edition proclaimed itself to be "against national-socialism, the agent of big business. The struggle for socialism continues." The resolution of the central committee "accepts the patriotic character of the resistance developed by certain sections of the Anglophile bourgeoisie and recognises the necessity to create a parallel movement to avoid the working class being dragged along behind".[15] Although it is equally fair to say that the anti-German, anti-Nazi sentiments that were widespread in the Belgian working class pushed the PCB into opposing the occupation more forcefully than the logic of their support for the Hitler-Stalin pact would imply.

The "Strike of 100,000" May 1941

In July 1940, the Belgian Communists launched an initiative to set up *Comités de Lutte Syndicale* (CLS, Committees of Trade Union Struggle) in the Liège engineering industry as a clandestine movement to defend workers rights and to distribute militant propaganda[16].

On 28 August 1940, 239 miners refused to go down the *Batterie* mine in Liège, demanding bread. From September to December 1940, throughout the Belgian mining region, but mainly in Liège, sporadic work stoppages took place demanding bread, potatoes or a wage increase. Louis Neuray, the senior shop steward at the ACEC factory (*Ateliers de Constructions Électriques de Charleroi*) in Herstal, organised a strike in December 1940 to demand a wage increase, although this led to his arrest. On 13 January 1941 at Bray, 450 miners went on strike, but this time the response was more severe; 50 miners were arrested and imprisoned for a week. From 20 to 31 January, a strike movement stopped 28 pits involving 7,200 miners and this time many engineering workers also took part. During April, there were work stoppages in the Ghent engineering and textile industry: *Carels*, *Chantiers Beauval*, *Clouteries des Flandres* and *Linière Gantoise*. At the end of April, 20,000 miners in the Mons and Charleroi regions went on strike for one day, but were persuaded to return to work by their pre-war delegates in return for unfulfilled promises.[17]

In April, instead of the promised issue of 15kg of potatoes for workers in heavy industry, they only received half that amount, while the rest of the population only got 2kg. So, on 18 April 1941, a Communist militant, Suzanne Grégoire, led a demonstration against food shortages.[18] Then, on 7 May it was announced that there would be no more potatoes for anyone. So, on 9 May at 6am, the miners of *Boverie des Charbonnages* at

[15] Renard, Claude, *Contribution à l'histoire du Parti Communiste de Belgique*, Bruxelles, CArCoB, 2009, p.16.
[16] Interview with Rodolphe Gillet in *Chroniques du Front de l'indépendance*, n°6, September 1979.
[17] *Le Drapeau Rouge*, May 1941 Reports in PCB newspaper, *Le Drapeau Rouge*, were seen as a means of extending Communist influence, so they have to be accurate. Any inaccuracy undermines this tactic fatally and so these reports can be considered a reliable source of information. An almost complete archive of *Le Drapeau Rouge* can be found on the "Belgian War Press" website - https://warpress.cegesoma.be/en/node/45857.
[18] Thomas, Adrian, "75 ans de Libération : le rôle incontournable de la Résistance", *Solidaire*, 2 September 2019.

Marihaye, refused to go down the pit. On Saturday 10 May, the first anniversary of the German invasion, the women from the foundry at *Cockerill,* the largest metalworking plant in Liège, toured the rest of the site convincing the other workers to stop work; 8,000 workers went on strike. By the time the engineers of Cockerill had started their strike, more than 6,000 miners were already out on strike. From Monday 12 May, the strike covered the whole Liège mining region. On the 13th, 20,000 miners and 11,000 engineers supported the action, the 14th 31,000 strikers, the next day 51,000, the 16th 54,000 and the 17th 33,000 engineers and 27,000 miners.[19]

Number of Strikers based on German reports [20]						
	14 May	15 May	16 May	17 May	19 May	20 May
Mines	22,838	25,051	26,325	27,883	9,826	7,073
Engineering	12,269	26,469	28,062	32,295	3,000	500
TOTAL	35,107	51,520	54,387	60,178	12,826	7,573

Julien Lahaut

Negotiations began on 12 May. Julien Lahaut, a Communist engineering worker, who was deputy mayor of the Liège suburb of Seraing, organised a strike committee based in the town hall. He led a delegation to Brussels composed of industrialists and workers from the region. On 13 and 14 May, they met Winter, a senior civil servant in the Ministry of Agriculture, who was in charge of food distribution. When he returned from Brussels on the 15th, Lahaut addressed a mass meeting of strikers in Seraing. The *Feldgendarmerie*[21] threatened to charge the crowd, but Lahaut managed to negotiate a ten minute truce and told the strikers: "Disperse, do not allow yourselves be provoked. But continue the strike!". In the end, the return to work took place between 19 and 21 May. Julien Lahaut returned to Brussels and, on the 21st, was able to announce that the German authorities would, as a matter of urgency, send

[19] *Le Drapeau Rouge*, June 1941.
Gotovitch, José, *La « grève des 100.000 »*, Bruxelles: CArCoB, 1992.
[20] Gotovitch, G*rève des 100.000.*
[21] German military police.

potatoes and other provisions to Liège.[22] In the context of the war, the results were remarkable, a wage rise of 8%, increased holidays and increased rations.

Women in the Front Rank

The underground newspaper of the PCB, *Le Drapeau rouge*, sheds a light on the active role of women in the strike.

The edition of May 1941 reads:

Strikes: despite the threats the strike movement grows

Since the 10 May, important strikes have been taking place in Belgium, generally around the same demands: increased provision of fresh food, wage increases and against tax increases. And these strikes have been accompanied by protests and demonstrations by women in a number of industrial towns.

During the strike, the women of the area around Mons have actively supported the industrial struggle. 400 women demonstrated at Paturages demanding more food supplies. (...) Last week, several strikes broke out in the engineering and textile industries in Ghent. (...) During these strikes, the women of the town demonstrated with their children to demand better food provision, the same as their sisters around Mons. These demonstrations were successful in obtaining a supply of potatoes.

Women Demonstrate in Liège

A special edition of June 1941 says:

Women demonstrate for food.

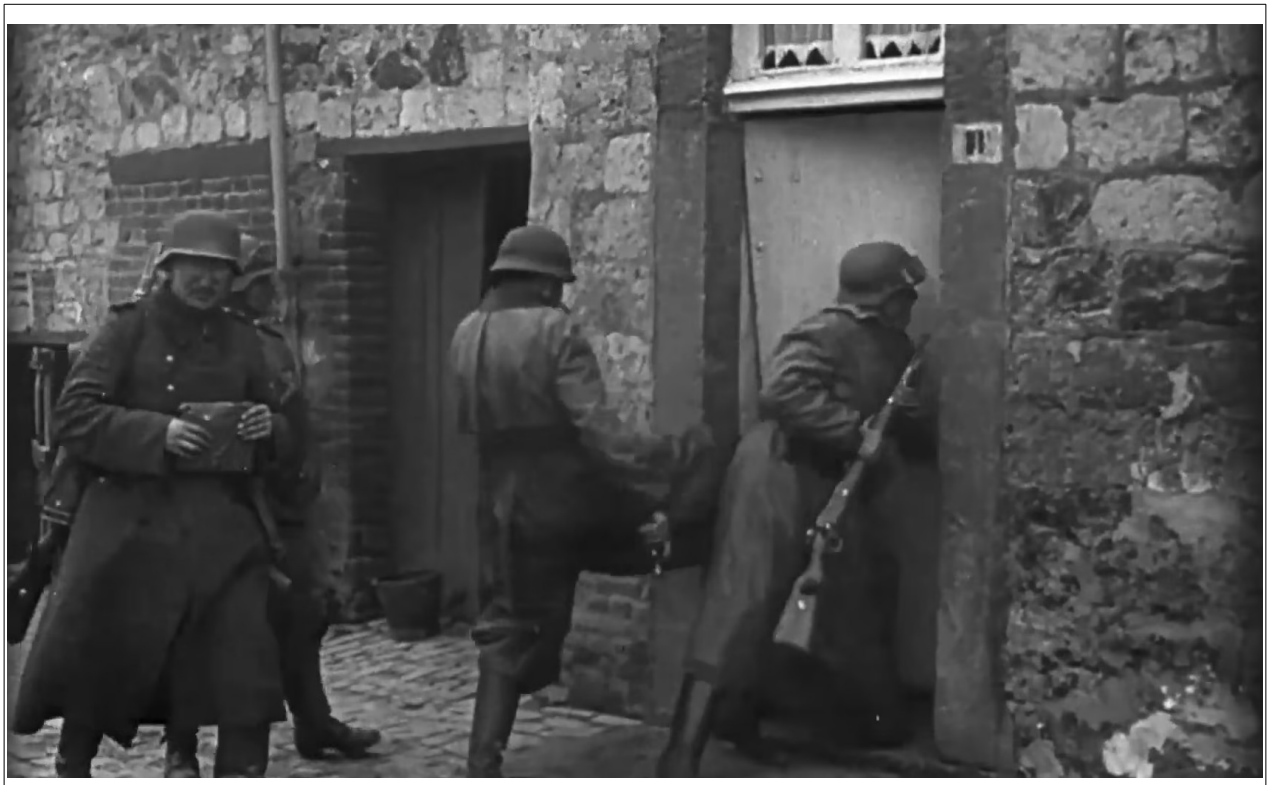
For the last month, a large number of delegations of women have been demanding that the authorities increase food provision, as well as frequently calling

[22] Pirlot, Jules, *Julien Lahaut vivant*, Editions du Cerisier, Mons, 2010, pp.97-100.

for the return of the prisoners of war. Every time, the authorities have promised to meet these demands, but never did so. Exasperated by this increasingly desperate situation, working class women have moved to more militant action. Above all demanding potatoes, an increased bread ration, meat, milk for children and old people, the women have begun to organise mass demonstrations against the authorities, in the streets and in the markets where they are demanding price reductions.

Repression

Hitler himself ordered an immediate food distribution to bring an end to a movement that was costing 2,000 tons of lost steel production every day. He could not afford to lose this in the run up to the invasion of the USSR.[23]



Operation Sonnenwende

A month later, on 22 June, Operation *Barbarossa* was launched and, at the same time, Operation *Sonnenwende* started the severe repression of the French and Belgian Communists. In Belgium, 1,800 left-wing militants were arrested by the occupying forces with the help of the Belgian police. Julien Lahaut was arrested and sent to a concentration camp in Germany,[24] On 22 September 1941, 60 miners who had been arrested for their role in the strike were deported from the prison in the citadel of Huy to the Neuengamme concentration camp. Only twenty-four 24 returned alive.[25]

[23] Gotovitch, *Du rouge au tricolore*, p. 114.
[24] Lefèvre, Jonathan, "Mai 1941, la grève des 100 000 | Gagner une grève en temps de guerre", *Solidaire*, 8 May 2016.
[25] Film: *Oser la grève sous l'occupation*, Dominique Dreyfus et Marie-Jo Pareja, Real Productions et Image Création, 2016.

The strikes of May 1941 in Belgium started as an economic struggle over food rations. Working class women led the campaign for increased food rations and the support from family members was crucial in sustaining the strike. Women workers in the engineering industry were also instrumental in initiating the mass action. The strong tradition of shop steward organisation in the Liège region provided leadership that was not restrained by a trade union bureaucracy that had either abdicated responsibility or were actively collaborating. Communist shop stewards led the action, but they in turn were influenced by the rank and file response and this, in turn fed back into the party leadership.

The strike gave a new impetus to the underground trade union movement and led the Communists to modify their tactics, giving increased emphasis to the *Comités de Lutte Syndicale* (CLS).

José Gotovitch writes:

> *The big strike by Belgian miners and metalworkers in May 1941 marks the reconnection of the party with social reality. Its role as catalyst and organiser of the movement allowed it to supplant the old trade union delegates in numerous southern Belgian French-speaking workplace*s.[26]
>
> As we shall see, a similar dynamic would operate in Northern France.

The "*Grande Grève"* in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais

After the German invasion, the mining companies took their revenge for the defeats they had suffered at the hands of the miners during the period of the Popular Front, 1936-38. Even before the occupation authorities demanded it, the mine owners stopped recognising the socially progressive legislation of 1936 and set about restoring "a taste for work and discipline".[27] The mine engineers, who had abandoned the good veins of coal during the Popular Front, quickly reopened then for the benefit of the Germans. However, even though the extraction machinery was old and worn out, OFK 670 demanded a 25% increase in productivity over the 1938 average. Piecework rates were cut back and the working day was lengthened by half an hour. Despite the decree of 28th June 1940 which froze wages and prices, there was a vast increase in the rate of inflation, while wages remained the same.[28]

The workers' response started very quickly in the Pas-de-Calais mining basin, with short wildcat strikes in August, September, October and November 1940. In January 1941, at pit number 7 of the *Escarpelle* mine, all the workers arrived half an hour late. The Germans responded by arresting two Communists from each pit.[29]

[26] Gotovitch, José, *Du Rouge au Tricolore. Les Communistes belges de 1939 à 1944*, Bruxelles, Éditions du CArCoB, 2018.
[27] Michel, Joël, *La mine*, Gallimard, Paris, 1993 p84.
[28] Lecœur, Auguste, *Croix de Guerre pour une Grève*, Plon, Paris, 1972 p.45-9.
[29] Lecœur, *Croix de Guerre pour une Grève*, p.58.

Dejonghe has given us a description of one of these strikes:

> *However, matters deteriorated on October 9 with the arrest of Michel Brûlé. Seen as a leader, he had been dismissed two days earlier without just cause. He nonetheless showed up that morning at pit 7 at Dourges, supported by his workmates who refused to descend without him. Alerted, the Kommandantur of Hénin-Liétard arrested him and sent him to Valenciennes where he was imprisoned. No sooner had he left than the workers walked out and the movement spread from pit to pit. A delegation was organised. Received at the Kommandantur around 3 p.m., they declared to the secretary that the strike would be general if their comrade was not returned to them. "Since it is a threat, we will see," retorted the latter. At nightfall, the International could be heard in the streets of Montigny-en-Gohelle, young people calling to each other in the city of Plaine, shouting "Long live the strike, long live the revolution".*
>
> *On the 10th, the entire Dourges concession was paralysed. In the afternoon, two processions of women gathered in the main square of Hénin-Liétard. They demanded more food and the release of Brûlé. Eight Feldgendarmes dispersed them, after having apprehended six people whom they handed over to the local police station. In the evening, the city walls are covered with posters warning the miners to return to work on pain of appearing before the Military Court. On the morning of the 11th, Brûlé was released.*[30]

The New Year of 1941 got off to a good start and throughout January miners in a dozen pits refused to work the extra half-hour, collectively arriving late or leaving early. This movement ground to a halt when German soldiers occupied Escarpelle on 25 January arresting 30 workers there, 14 at Aniche and 27 from Drocourt. In February, there were rolling strikes in Dourges, Courrières and Anzin, while Anzin was out again in April and Douchy in mid-May leading to 11 arrests. In April and May, the movement spread to engineering and transport workers in Lille, St Amand, Hautmont, Aulnoye and Dunkirk with one or two day strikes demanding increased food rations. The scene was set for *La Grande Grève*.[31]

Grievances

Traditionally, the vast majority of miners in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais had voted for the SFIO, but the anti-German stance of the PCF publications in the region gave considerable credibility to the Communist agitation, while many of the social democratic trade union leaders became detached from the mass of workers because of their support for the collaborationist Vichy regime of Marshal Pétain. At the national level, the trade union

[30] Dejonghe Étienne, "Les Communistes dans le Nord/Pas-de-Calais de juin 1940 à la veille de la grève des mineurs", *Revue du Nord*, Lille, July-September 1986.
[31] The Big Strike.

official, René Belin, who was a member of the SFIO and who had been appointed Minister of Labour in the Vichy government, signed the decree which dissolved the trade unions. In the Forbidden Zone, in order to by-pass the discredited union bureaucracy, Communist militants set up the *Comités d'Unité Syndicale et d'Action* (CUSA, Committees of Trade Union Unity and Action), which became very important as the working class movement regrouped.

The lack of food was the main problem facing all workers during the war, but it was particularly acute in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais because the Forbidden Zone had become separated from the organisation of supplies in the rest of France. Milk, butter, meat and potatoes became increasingly scarce. The first signs of the developing strike movement began in September 1940, but were quickly crushed. However, as a result, the German authorities set up a rationing system that attempted to favour certain categories of workers that were considered indispensable for the development of those industries that they needed. "Miners and heavy labourers", in addition to the ordinary ration, had a supplementary allowance known as the "MT". Despite this relative advantage, officially 165 grams of meat, 100 grams of lard and 150 grams of bread, the miners and other manual workers quickly came to resent this rationing system. For miners, this only represented half their pre-war level of consumption. However, the authorities were not able to supply even these meagre official rations. Moreover, rationing not only affected food supplies, but also food, soap and tobacco.

The bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie of the region were able to get their supplies on the black market, indeed it was widely known that the capital required to fund the black market originated with some of the engineering and textile employers, who in the economic depression following the invasion were looking for other sources of profit. However, the workers, whose wages were frozen at pre-war levels, had nothing to spare to pay the inflated prices charged on the black market; their only hope was the clandestine trade union organisations.

The underground newspapers highlighted the hunger and the failure of the rationing system as well as the ensuing corruption in their campaign against Vichy, the occupation and the employers. *Avant-Garde* wrote:

> *The companies are trying to to oppress the miners. Young miners are particularly paying the price for this reactionary, barbaric exploitation...Even though they do not have enough to eat, the companies want them to work an extra half hour without pay*.

And in a leaflet that was distributed on 5th and 6th June 1941:

> *The occupation authorities, who protect the interests of our capitalists, have just published posters that make threats directed at the workers. In reply to these*

threats we say Enough! Give us bread for our wives and children. We do not want to be slaves, we shall show our strength and determination.[32]

Bedaux System

In addition to the problems caused by the food shortages, the employers were also trying to use the German occupation to organise a productivity offensive. The Bedaux system consisted of "scientifically" breaking down the work of a miner into units of production. An average worker produced 60 units. If he exceeded this number, he was paid more but if he failed to achieve it he was penalised. This meant that wages were individually calculated. The discipline in the mines was hard and the companies had their own police forces, the *équipes de surveillance*[33]. The foremen played an essential role in fixing wages as they were responsible for organising the distribution of tasks. In order to assert their authority, they had a range of penalties at their disposal, ranging from a simple fine through to dismissal.[34] The method used in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais differed from the classic Bedaux system in that work was organised in small teams of 4 rather than individual payments. The Vichy government and the occupation created an environment that was extremely favourable for the implementation of the new system.[35] However, this productivity offensive started a revolt among the mineworkers as they struggled to defend their working conditions. These were the circumstances in which a young Communist miner, Michel Brûlé, called a strike on 26 May in pit 7 at Dourges, a mine called *le Dahomey.*[36]

Michel Brûlé

A note from the mine manager to the president of the Chamber of Mines sets out the causes of the strike:

Starting on the 16 April, we began to introduce in some of the levels, chosen from the most productive, payment based on team work, firstly in pit number 2, then progressively over the following fortnight, to the other sites owned by the company. At pit number 7, which we left until last, this form of organisation was introduced on 16 May in just 2 levels, but from the beginning, under the influence of agitators who had managed to distribute their circulars underground, the workers on these two levels refused to be organised in teams, disobeying the instructions of their foreman. This morning, 27 May, the foreman insisted that the miners work in teams that he

[32] Petit, Alain, “Le problème de la faim dans les mines du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais et la grève de mai-juin 1941” in *Cahiers d’histoire* 1991, #47 pp.41-54.
[33] literally "Surveillance teams".
[34] Dejonghe Étienne. "Les problèmes sociaux dans les entreprises houillères du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais durant la seconde guerre mondiale", in: *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, tome 18 N°1, January-March 1971. p. 126.
[35] Kourchid, Olivier, "La remise en cause des acquis de 1936. La réintroduction du système Bedaux aux mines du Nord-Pas-de-Calais", *Cahiers d'histoire*, #47, 1991, pp.18-21.
[36] Noguères Henri, *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, Laffont, Paris, 1967 tome 1 p.384.

assigned. The workers stopped work and went out with the other workers in the same area. In particular, I would like to record the role played by Brûlé Michel, Houillez Georges, Florecq Voltaire, who were found by the senior foreman on level 400, while their normal place of work is level 330.

Extraction stopped completely at 11am and the afternoon shift did not go down.[37]

By Thursday 29th, the strike had spread to Courrières et Ostricourt, where there we active *Comités d'Unité Syndicale et d'Action*.

The workers did not take their lamps as they usually do and did not descend below. When questioned by the foremen, they said nothing, nor was any delegation formed to present their demands before they left the premises. After they went, management became aware of a wooden board with a handwritten notice on it which said "General Strike in the mines of Lens, Dourges and Hénin-Liétard. We demand food supplies, soap, wage increases.[38]

The strike continued to spread and by 31 May, involved 80,000 miners.

General Niehoff, German regional commander, unwittingly helped the strike movement by ordering two posters to be displayed, one which summoned the miners to return to work immediately and the other announcing that eleven miners and two women Communists had been sentenced to prison with hard labour. After this, the strike became even more solid.

On 2 June, the strike spread to the east and west sides of the mining basin.

On 3 June, every pit was affected as well as the ancillary plants.

On 4 June, 80% of the region's miners had stopped work and the strike started to spread to other industries

By the 5th, there was a slight return to work, down to 76% on strike, but the word had spread to the Roubaix textile industry, the Beghin sugar factory at Faches-Thumesnil and the engineering works at Fives-Lille-Cail et à Marquette.

Martha Desrumaux was leader of the PCF in the department of Nord was an ex-textile worker and trade union official. She had spent the time following the invasion rebuilding the party organisation in the department, particularly in the textile industry of Lille and Roubaix as well as among the engineers of Douai and the Sambre basin. She was able to use this organisation to spread solidarity strikes. Many of the Lille textile workers were the daughters or wives of miners and they played a significant in spreading word of the strike, as well as having their own grievances.[39]

[37] Dejonghe Étienne. "Chronique de la grève des mineurs du Nord/Pas-de-Calais (27 mai - 6 juin 1941)". In: *Revue du Nord*, tome 69, n°273, April-June 1987. p. 326.
[38] *Ibid*.

The difficulties of organising a strike under the noses of the Nazi occupation forces and the French Police were enormous. Strikers from one pit would picket another where they were not known in order to avoid being denounced by scabs or informers. Militants from the *Jeunesse Communiste* were present with their revolvers to reinforce the picket lines and to deter the French police.[40]

There was a group of Polish Communists led by Rudolf Larysz, who worked in the mines at Courrières and these Polish miners, who comprised 29% of the workforce, were solid supporters of the strike.[41]

Polish Miners on Strike

The departments of Nord and Pas-de-Calais were home to 300,000 Polish immigrants who had arrived throughout the 1930s to fill the shortage of labour created by the high French death toll in the First World War, as well as to escape the repressive regime back in Poland. Over 40,000 Poles worked in the coal-mining industry and like the majority of their workmates, the Polish miners were affected by the lack of food. These Polish immigrants were politically divided between, on the one hand, members of the CGT and the sympathisers of the Communist party, and on the other, activists in the Polish organisations that were supported by the Polish authorities and members of catholic religious organisations. The left wing was organised around the Polish speaking section of the French Communist Party and the veterans of the Dabrowski Brigade, who had fought in the Spanish civil war. In 1936, the Polish groupings in the CGT had 80,000 members, of which 35,000 were in the 56 Polish sections in the Pas-de-Calais. Moreover, the majority of catholic Poles in the mines supported the union organisation led by the Communists out of workplace solidarity, seeing this as the best way to defend their common interests. This same solidarity led them to solidly support the strikes.

In January 1941, when the mining companies lengthened the miners' working day by half an hour, miners in some pits left their posts and refused to work during this extra time; in the mine at l'Escarpelle, the strike call was given by Polish miners. When the mining companies alerted the German authorities, the ensuing arrests of 53 miners included a number of Polish Communists. During the strike of May-June 1941, Jan Rutkowski and Rudolf Larysz were both members of the central strike committee with many Poles also working on the local strike committees.[42]

[39] Outteryck, Pierre, *Martha Desrumaux - Une Femme du Nord Ouvrière Syndicaliste Déportée Féministe*, Lille: CGT 59/62, 2006, p.173.
[40] Pannequin, *Ami si tu tombes*, p.103.
[41] Ponty, Janine, "L'Occupation en France et en Belgique 1940-44 (Tome 2)", *Revue du Nord* No 2 (hors série), Lille, 1988.
[42] Gogolewski, Edmond, "Les Polonais dans la grève des mineurs de mai-juin 1941", *Cahiers d'histoire*, 1991, #47 pp.66-71. Zamojski J. "La participation des Polonais à la Résistance dans le Pas-de-Calais et le Nord (1940-1944)". In *Revue du Nord*, tome 57, n°226, July-September 1975. pp. 435-459.

The Italians

Not as numerous as the Poles, the population of Italian origin in the mining basin only numbered 7 or 8,000, including women and children. The Italian miners of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais participated actively in the 1941 strike as part of the general mining community. After the strike, a number of them were in the forefront of the armed resistance.

Italian fascist influence was weak in the mining areas, where the Italian miners and their families often held solid anti-fascist sympathies long before they arrived in France, indeed many of them had emigrated to escape the consequences of their anti-fascist activity back in Italy.

The second generation who grew up in France generally followed in their parents' footsteps. The Italians experienced the same difficulties as their French counterparts during 1939 and 40, the same deterioration in working conditions, the same economic restrictions. The German authorities showed no special sympathy to the Italians in the mining basin and repression hit the Italians from the beginning of the occupation. In August 1940, the Italian government gave the Germans a list of the names of immigrants in the region, indicating militants who were known to the Italian police. The combination of this anti-fascist sentiment with the similar economic problems explains the enthusiastic participation of the Italians in the strike of May-June 1941.

Their involvement in this strike would have further consequences for the Italian miners. The mining companies indicated leading Italian strikers, some of whom were arrested by the German police and handed over to the Italian police.[43]

Women and the 1941 Miners' Strike

The role of women in the strike was extremely important, they picketed the pitheads, they followed the scabs and they organised demonstrations outside the offices of the mining companies. This was recognised by the German authorities who issued the following decree:

> *"By order of the Oberfeldkommandant, from Friday 6 June, women are formally prohibited from leaving home half an hour before the start of a shift".*[44]

In 1940, Georgette Caron, ex-secretary of the *Comités des Femmes contre la Guerre et le Fascisme* (Women's Committees against War and Fascism), began organising underground women's committees in the mining towns and villages of the Pas-de-Calais. In the build-up to the big strike, women's demonstrations demanding an increase in the food ration were an important part of the agitation. On 24 April 1941, 150 women gathered before the town hall in Raismes to protest about the lack of food. On 7 May, 60

[43] Damiani, Rudi, "Les mineurs italiens du bassin du Nord-Pas-de-Calais dans la grève du printemps 1941", *Cahiers d'histoire*, 1991, #47 pp.61-65.
[44] Lecœur, *Croix de Guerre pour une Grève*, p.85.

women demonstrated in front of the town hall in Neuf-Mesnil to demand ration coupons for potatoes and butter. The mayor was not in his office, so they occupied the building to await his return, at which point he distributed the coupons they were demanding to get rid of them. The news of this positive outcome quickly spread and the majority of the women of the town gathered to demand the same distribution. Inspired by this example, on the 9th, 100 women demonstrated in front of the town hall in Maubeuge and then also occupied the building. They returned on the 12th and, this time, the authorities gave in and set up a soup kitchen. A similar demonstration took place on 29 May at Comines, also forcing the setting up of a soup kitchen.

The demonstrations were part of the build-up to the strike and were clearly intended to raise the political temperature. The peaceful and disciplined nature of these demonstrations bear witness to a high level of organisation. They were not riots, neither were they spontaneous, we merely do not know who organised most of them, however they were clearly linked to the industrial action being planned by the miners. The Raismes demonstration, which took place on 24 April, took place immediately after a strike in the Anzin mine, which had been broken by the arrest of 6 Communist militants. The women chanted exactly the same slogans as the miners on strike.[45]

After the strikes started in May 1941, when the French police or the German *Feldgendarmes* started patrolling at the mines, the leaders of the women's committees agreed with the strike leaders that women would organise strike pickets around the pitheads from four in the morning. On 29 May, several hundred women assembled at Hénin-Liétard infront of the company offices, led by Émilienne Mopty. At Hames and in the neighbouring villages, Esther Brun, Marie Bigotte, Zoé Denverhelle, Marie Defrenne, Justine Delforge, Louise Delvallez, Mireille Plateels and her mother, Euphrasie Zarkiowski equally led hundreds of women to the town hall.

Suzanne Cofin led thirty women behind a banner reading "Enough Hunger" to the town hall at Bruay, where they had a confrontation with the *gendarmes*. A report dated 2 June 1941 from the *gendarmerie* in Lens to the *sous-préfet* and the *Kreiskommandantur* states:

> *Groups of women have been seen in various places inciting the workers to go on strike. They have been dispersed by gendarmerie patrols at, for example: pit number 5 of the Lens mines. At Calonne, a group of 500 women and children were dispersed by the Lens and Liévin brigades, in conjunction with the Liévin municipal police, but with some difficulty. Pit number 1 of the Liévin mines: a group of 500*

[45] Taylor, Lynne, *Between Resistance and Collaboration - Popular Protest in Northern France 1940-45*, Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000. pp.98-101 & 105.

women were dispersed between 11am and 1pm in the same manner. At Hénin-Liétard, several groups of 50 to 100 women have been dispersed.[46]

During the night, militants distributed leaflets calling on women to come to the town hall at Billy-Montigny on 4 June at 3pm to demand better food provision. About 300 turned up on the day and they presented their demands at the town hall, then they agreed to continue their demonstration outside the offices of the mining company. The women's committees of the region had summoned similar crowds of women to the town halls of the neighbouring towns and these then marched to Billy-Montigny to reinforce their sisters. Eventually 2000 women gathered outside the company offices. The German soldiers, accompanied by the local police, sent to protect the mine management, shut the gates and then started to push the women back using the butts of their rifles. Under the leadership of Esther Brun and Émilienne Mopty, the women linked arms and thereby managed to prevent any arrests.

The wives of the Polish miners also organised demonstrations in from of the town halls, for example 150 Polish women in front of the town hall at Sallaumines in April 1941 demanding potatoes and soap.

The women also faced repression: 40 women were taken as hostage and interned with the men at the Kléber prison in Lille on 3 June, including Madames Dujardin, Cayoux, Merlin, Aubin, Demerville, Levêque, Hortensia Cloez, Madeleine Trehoux, Eloïse Judas, Suzanne Dufiot and Marie-Louise Georges.

On 27 May, Eliane Geoffroy from Beuvry was arrested with 10 miners from Auchel and Beuvry and taken to Béthune prison.

On 29 and 30 May, 3 women from Courcelles, Jeanne Delbarre, Suzanne Morel, and Marie Stasiak were also imprisoned in Béthune.

On 3 June 1941, a court condemned 11 miners from Ostricourt and two women, Micheline Bondenzach and Florence Guettez to imprisonment with hard labour. The following day several thousand women demonstrated demanding their release. Esther Brun was later arrested and deported to a concentration camp. Other women joined the underground resistance.[47]

The importance of women to the agitation before the strike and to solidarity during the action bear a remarkable similarity to the earlier events in Belgium described above.

Repression

On 6 June 1941, patrols by the German army and French police were increased and the arrest of militants began in earnest. Two hundred miners and fifty women from mining families were arrested that day, their names having been supplied by the mine

[46] Cothias-Dumeix, Josette, "Les femmes et la grève des mineurs de mai-juin 1941", *Cahiers d'histoire*, N° 47 - Les luttes des mineurs de 1940 à 1944, 1991.
[47] Copin, Auguste, et Jacques Duclos, *L' Aurore se lève au pays noir*. Paris: Éditions sociales, 1966.

management. Cafés, restaurants and cinemas were closed and shops were forbidden to sell wine, beer and spirits. On 7 June, the Lille court-martial sentenced 15 of the accused to between three and five years hard labour. However, more significantly than this reign of terror, hunger, deprivation and lack of money began to sap the determination of the strikers.

The local leadership of the PCF gave the instruction to return to work on Monday 9 June. A leaflet distributed in Douai stated:

> *"The massive repression meted out by the occupation forces at the service of the mining companies (hundreds of arrests) prevents the miners from continuing with the strike. In these conditions, you cannot continue the struggle alone. You are at risk from the enormous police operation being undertaken in the two departments.*
>
> ***Back to work on Monday 9 June.***
>
> *Your courageous battle has not been useless: in many places, the bosses have given way... The companies have taken notice of your demands: your magnificent battle can only make them think and, in order that your demands may be met, stay united, ready to take up the struggle in other ways, using methods that will not be so easy to repress".*[48]

The miners obtained larger food rations and improved health and safety. 460,000 tons of coal production were lost.[49] Nevertheless, there was price to pay and management gave the French police the names of those they considered to be the strike leaders. As a result, 314 arrests were made, 244 of whom were deported, 130 never returned. Nine Communists were taken as hostages and they were later shot. Michel Brûlé went underground and became one of the armed militants of the OS. He was later betrayed by an informer and shot by firing squad on 14 April 1942.

However, the principal outcome was political. The strike had been launched against the mine-owners and the early demands were purely economic. But the miners had to face a ferocious repression and the majority of them realised that winning their demands was linked to resistance to the Nazis and their French collaborators. The repression, by forcing a considerable number of miners into hiding, produced the ideal conditions for recruitment into the armed resistance. Thus, militants from the mining communities became the first to join the ranks of the armed resistance in the Forbidden Zone.

Connections

Was there a connection between the strikes in Belgium and France? Neither the historians of the events nor the surviving veterans of these struggles speak of any joint organisation between the PCB and the PCF of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais or between the

[48] Dejonghe, *Chronique de la grève des mineurs*, p. 338.
[49] Pannequin, *Ami si tu tombes*, p.103.

clandestine union organisations in both regions. For both Communist parties and underground union organisations, their focus was on their own national politics.

Martha Desrumaux

However, Martha Desrumaux, leader of the PCF in the Nord, had a long history of good relations with the Belgian trade union movement, going back to her activism in the 1931 textile strike in Bailleul. She was also responsible for maintaining liaison between the PCF and Eugen Fried, the Comintern representative in Brussels. She spent much of her time in hiding with her sister in Comines on the Belgian border, from where she organised the smuggling of printed material into Nord-Pas-de-Calais.[50]

Another potential link was the veterans of the Dabrowski Battalion of the International Brigade, 3,500 of whom were Polish miners from Northern France and Southern Belgium.

The similarity between the French *Comités d'Unité Syndicale et d'Action* and the Belgian *Comités de Lutte Syndicale* is striking, as is the similar hostility to the occupying Germans. The workers of the two regions also faced the same problems of lack of food and other essentials. There were many Belgian immigrants working in the mines and engineering factories of the Pas-de-Calais who would have maintained family connections, indeed Michel Brûlé, who called the first strike in France was married to a Belgian Communist factory worker.

Thus, there were so many links between the mining communities of Northern France and Belgium that the connection between the two strikes was inevitable; so many ways in which the French miners would have heard about the success of the Belgian strikes and, facing the same problems, would have easily been persuaded to adopt the same solution.[51]

So why was the level of repression meted out by the occupying authorities different in the cases of Amsterdam, Liège and the Pas-de-Calais? The Amsterdam general strike was a clear threat to the German occupation and in direct opposition to their antisemitism as well as being in defiance of their Dutch allies. As such, they would have seen it as political opposition that needed to be crushed as soon as possible. The Belgian and French strikes started as economic disputes that the German authorities initially saw as an internal question for the companies affected; they had no particular love for the Belgian and French employers nor any concern for their profits. They just wanted production to restart as soon as possible. The Communist Party's agitation did not particularly target their occupation during the period of the Hitler-Stalin pact and would not have led them to

[50] Outteryck, *Martha Desrumaux*, pp.115, 166

[51] My thanks to Claude Coussement for his helpful comments.

believe that the strike was aimed at them. The difference lies in the economic and political situation in the two countries.

Belgium had not suffered much destruction during the German invasion and production had restarted promptly, assuring the employers of continued profits. The employers were prepared to negotiate from the beginning and joined the delegation to Brussels to jointly plead for better provisions. The German authorities were thus able to consider it an internal Belgian matter and, recognising that full production required food provision, did what they could to increase supplies. The Belgian steel industry, which relied on local coal, was very important to the German armaments industry on the eve of the invasion of the USSR, so Hitler himself ordered increased food provision. German revenge came after 21 June.

Northern France, on the other hand, had suffered massive destruction during the fighting at the time of the invasion and production had been slow to restart. The employers were therefore short of their expected returns and in an economically desperate position. They had suffered a bad defeat at the hands of the miners and textile workers during the 1936 strikes associated with the Popular Front and were looking to claw back their profitability and authority. The northern French bourgeoisie was notoriously right wing and had hoped for a fascist-style outcome of the 1934 extreme right wing riots and attempted coup in Paris. The fact that these had been defeated by working class united action only increased their desire for revenge on their employees. Thus, they were not prepared to give in and looked to the German army and French police to crush what they saw as a rebellion. The local French collaborationist authority was run by the *préfet*, Fernand Carles, who was a hardline anti-Communist who urged the Germans on to ever greater repression; he had handed over the list of Communists compiled by his police service and went so far as to urge the Germans to set up a concentration camp in the Nord. So, while at first the German authorities equally saw the strike in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais as an internal French affair, it quickly became obvious that there was no local solution and so they clamped down heavily.

Contradiction

There was a contradiction at the centre of the political line of the PCF central committee during this period. In calling for opposition to the Vichy government and the French employers, the national leadership of the PCF tried to ignore the German occupation, but this proved impossible. The militancy of the workers in northern France exposed the inadequacy of the leadership position and the pushed of the Communists of the Forbidden Zone to adopt policies that the national leadership would only adopt after the invasion of the Soviet Union. Similarly, the ferocious attacks and sabotage instigated by Charles Debarge and Eusébio Ferrari demonstrated the need to maintain close links

with their communities and that the partisan struggle only progressed with popular support and in tandem with mass working class action. This experience was essential to the national organisation when Auguste Lecœur was called to Paris and made head of national security for the PCF.

From Barbarossa to Stalingrad, from Blitzkrieg to Total War

The USSR made an error in signing the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact and compounded their error in not sufficiently preparing for the German invasion of June 1941. This is not just hindsight, Leon Trotsky predicted in September 1939:

> *Germany is carrying out in stages her program of domination by war. With the help of England, she re-armed despite the opposition of France. With the help of Poland she isolated Czechoslovakia. With the help of the Soviet Union she not only wishes to enslave Poland but to destroy the old colonial empires. If Germany succeeds with the Kremlin's help in emerging victorious from the present war, that will signify mortal danger for the Soviet Union. Let us recall that directly after the Munich agreement, Dimitroff, secretary of the Comintern, made public – undoubtedly on Stalin's order – an explicit calendar of Hitler's future conquests. The occupation of Poland is scheduled in that calendar for the fall of 1939. Next in order follow: Yugoslavia, Rumania, Bulgaria, France, Belgium ... And then, at the bottom, in the fall of 1941, the offensive is to begin against the Soviet Union. These revelations must undoubtedly be based upon information obtained by the Soviet espionage service*.[52]

The national leadership of the PCF also made a mistake in their wholehearted support of the pact. An error that cost them dear. The Communists in northern France, while formally endorsing the national position of supporting the pact, in practice carried on with the class struggle and prioritised that struggle when it brought them into conflict with the German occupation. "The main enemy is at home" has long been a slogan of internationalist socialists. For the Communists of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, their confrontation with their employers brought them into conflict with the occupation. They knew this would happen and carried on regardless. This early experience placed them in the forefront of working class anti-Nazi resistance.

However, with the German invasion of the Soviet Union on the morning of 22 June 1941, the situation changed completely for the Communists. The divisions and doubts disappeared and everyone was happy to drop an untenable policy. A fight with no quarter had begun.

[52] *Socialist Appeal*, Vol. III No. 68, 11 September 1939, pp.1 & 2.

One night in March 1942, Charles Debarge, Marcel Ledant et Moïse Boulanger crossed the Césarine bridge in Lens towards two German soldiers on guard duty who were talking to two young women.

Charles Debarge

"*Followed by two comrades who, like me had their revolvers hidden behind their backs, we went towards the two guards. At two metres distance, I opened fire, as did my comrades. But you would have thought that both Germans were wearing armour as neither of them fell. So it turned into a fist-fight. I grabbed the barrel of the rifle that one of them was bringing to bear on me, but he held on tightly. I pulled him for ten metres away from the brawl and, to finish him off, tried to put a bullet in his head but the revolver misfired. Luckily, my comrades came to my rescue, gravely wounding the soldier, but I injured my hand at the same time. Nevertheless, I had the pleasure of walking away with another rifle*".[53]

This is how Charles Debarge, who would become the most famous of the Communist urban guerrillas in the Pas-de-Calais, described his first, chaotic attack on the life of a German soldier.

However, this story has its beginnings several months earlier in Paris when a young Communist, Pierre Georges, started a wave of deadly attacks against German soldiers. Two Communists Samuel Tyszelman and Henry Gauterot were executed on 19 August 1941 for their participation in a demonstration in Paris. To avenge them, the future "Colonel Fabien", already a veteran of the International Brigades, took the decision to kill a German officer and thereby force his comrades to overcome their reluctance. This leader of the young Communists killed a German officer, Alphonse Moser, with two shots from his revolver on the platform of the Métro Barbès in Paris on 21 August 1941.[54]

His actions also set off a widespread debate within the Communist party as well as between the Communists and other resistance movements. Up until that moment, the line of the PCF had been to counter-pose mass action to what they referred to as anarchist petit-bourgeois terrorism.

Albert Ouzoulias, commander of the *Bataillons de la Jeunesse* (Youth Battalions), armed wing of the *Jeunesse Communiste* said:

"*For us, even a Nazi was a human being. The discussions had centred on this question. The comrades refused to execute a German soldier who could have been a*

[53] Cited in Angeli, Claude et Paul Gillet, *La Résistance dans le Nord*, Famot, Genève, 1974 p.150.
[54] Noguères, Henri, *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, Laffont, Paris, 1967, tome 2, p.69.

Communist comrade from Hamburg or a worker from Berlin. Even an officer could have been an anti-Nazi teacher. At least, everyone felt that killing a Gestapo officer was justified.

But our comrades did not understand that the best way to defend our country during a war was to kill the maximum number of German officers. This would hasten the end of the war and the end of the misfortune that has affected many of the peoples of the world, including the German people. Internationalism at this time was to kill the largest possible number of Nazis".[55]

In fact, the majority of Communists were happy to be rid of the Hitler-Stalin pact and were quickly comfortable with the combativity of the new line.

Châteaubriant

On 14 August 1941, a week before the events at Métro Barbès, the Vichy government had issued a decree repressing Communist and anarchist activity and created the *sections spéciales,* special anti-Communist courts. Thus, even before Fabien's attack, the system of repression had been put in place, not by the Nazi occupying forces, but by the French collaborationist government of Marshal Pétain. The German authorities took advantage of this legislation without delay and executed five militants: Roger Nogarède, Alfred Offino, André Sigorney, Raymond Justice and Jean-Louis Rapinat for "taking part in a Communist demonstration directed against the German army", the same demonstration that had cost Samuel Tyszelman and Henry Gauterot their lives.

On 22 August the *Militärbefehlshaber in Frankreich* decreed:

> "All French people under arrest shall henceforth be considered hostages and, in the case of a new act, a number of hostages corresponding the gravity of the criminal act will be shot".[56]

In October 1941 the PCF decided to unify its armed groups into the *Organisation Spéciale* (OS), which was renamed the *Francs-Tireurs et Partisans* (FTP) in the spring of 1942 under the overall command of Charles Tillon with Jules Dumont as one of the *commissaires militaires.* Dumont was born in the Nord in 1888, a veteran of the First World War and the war in Morocco. When the Italian army invaded Ethiopia in 1935, he went there to help fight Italian imperialism. In November 1937 he was in Madrid where he commanded the *Commune de Paris* battalion which defended the university campus. He became commander of the XIV International Brigade, the *Marseillaise*.[57]

Jules Dumont decided to build armed groups called *brûlots* (fireships), which would be sent to perform important acts of resistance in regions where they were not known and where the occupying forces had not so far had to face significant militant opposition. One

[55] *Ibid*., p73.
[56] Noguères, *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, p.82.
[57] Fossier, *Zone Interdite*, p.304.

such group was sent to Nantes and, on 20 October, in the cathedral square, they shot and killed Lieutenant Colonel Hotz, *Feldkommandant* of Nantes. Pierre Pecheu, Vichy Minister of the Interior signed the death warrants of 27 prisoners from the internment camp of Châteaubriant and 21 from the prison in Nantes. They were shot, legend has it, all singing the Marseillaise.[58] This execution was in many ways a turning point and shocked many French people out of their passivity.

General de Gaulle, speaking on Radio London the next day, said:

> *"It is absolutely normal and absolutely justified that Germans should be killed by the French. If the Germans do not wish to die at our hands, they need only stay at home... But there is a tactic to war. War must be conducted by those who have been given the responsibility... At the present moment, the instructions that I am giving for the occupied territories is not to openly kill Germans. This for only one reason: at this moment, it is too easy for the enemy to respond by massacring our combatants while they are disarmed. However, as soon as we are able to pass over to the attack, the orders you want will be given".*[59]

Here we see all the contradictions inherent in Gaullist politics. General de Gaulle was a career officer who did not like irregular troops. But in 1941 his own forces were small and he needed the resistance to gain him a place in the councils of the Allies. Nevertheless, he distrusted mass movements because he did not want to return to a socialist France. So, he developed the politics of *attentisme*, wait and see, waiting until D-Day and then systematically harassing the enemy on the instructions of the Allied generals. It seems obvious that a secret organisation could not, from one day to the next, without any combat experience and after years of waiting passively, become an efficient army. But when it came to it, for General de Gaulle, an inefficient army under his control was much more acceptable than an army of militant left-wing partisans.

Jules Dumont had to leave Paris. He returned to the Nord where he became military leader of the FTP in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, with Julien Hapiot and Charles Debarge as his deputies.

Urban Guerrillas

The repression following the 1941 miners' strike forced many strikers and their supporters to go on the run. Many of these militants took naturally to armed action, initially to ensure their own defence, then to obtain more weapons and soon to carry the fight to the occupying forces and their collaborators.

René Denys and Eusébio Ferrari had already attacked three German officers on 25 August 1941 in the Rue de Paris in Lille, killing two of them.[60] However, this remained an

[58] Noguères, *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, p152.
[59] *Ibid*. p.156.
[60] Angeli et Gillet, *La Résistance dans le Nord*, p.136.

isolated incident until March 1942 when Charles Debarge received a directive from the PCF central committee in Paris. He wrote in his journal:

> *"I have received precise orders. We had to directly attack the Germans. I had to lead my comrades with determination into this sort of direct action. I shall set an example and put myself at the head of the squads whenever I can. Because the debate will be very difficult, that is obvious. I need to overcome the anxiety of those comrades who say: Every time we kill a German, hostages will lose their lives".*[61]

Thus the incident on the Césarine bridge in Lens set off a spiral of assassinations and executions by firing squad in the Forbidden Zone. Was it worth it? Firstly, in order to obtain weapons it was necessary to attack German soldiers, as the parachute drops from the Allies went almost entirely to the *attentistes*. Moreover, the assassinations and the derailment of troop trains produced an atmosphere of unease for the occupying army and France quickly lost its reputation as a holiday camp for German soldiers. There was also the political consequences. There was a high proportion of Communists among the hostages who were shot and, every time there was an announcement that five or ten hostages would be shot, the FTP would gain fifty or more recruits. The bravery of the Communist resistance fighters gave a large number of people the idea that it was possible to oppose the occupation. Even Colonel Rémy, chief spokesman for the *attentistes* said:

> "*It is however true, the echo of the firing squads awakened in the hearts of the French a righteous anger which frequently threw them into the underground struggle*".[62]

Let us give the last word to Jean-Paul Carrier, who was in prison expecting to be named as a hostage.

> "*We heard the echoes of the progress of the resistance active in the town. This was the time of the first "executions" and the first attacks on the Wehrmacht buildings. And we were pleased, even though we knew what it could mean for us".*[63]

Communist Resistance Fighters

There are two legendary figures among the first Communist resistance fighters in the Forbidden Zone, Charles Debarge and Eusébio Ferrari.

Charles Debarge, "Charlie", was a thirty-one year old miner who lived in Harnes in the Pas-de-Calais, thirty kilometres south of Lille. He went on the run after his activity in the miners' strike of 1941 put him on the wanted list. He was arrested on 6 August 1941 having already organised an attempted train derailment and blown up two electric pylons. He managed to escape that same evening from the *Feldgendarmerie*, 36, rue de la Liberté in Lille.

[61] "Carnets de Charles Debarge", cited by Angeli et Gillet, *La Résistance dans le Nord*, p.149.
[62] Noguères, *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, p.161.
[63] *Ibid*. p164.

It was the beginning of a manhunt, life or death. They had been ordered to shoot us on sight. But if these gentlemen had decided to attack us, we had also decided to sell our hides dearly.[64]

In 1942, the underground leadership of the PCF in the Pas-de-Calais charged him with the task of organising widespread sabotage in the region, which he did with foolhardy courage. On 12 January 1942 he unsuccessfully launched an attack on the prison at Loos-lès-Lille, where his wife Raymonde and numerous other resistance fighters were imprisoned. He organised a group of twenty young activists who blew up pylons, derailed trains and raided mines for explosives, as well as attacking German soldiers and French collaborators.

Eusébio Ferrari was a very different character. Son of an Italian immigrant family living in Fenain, he was ten years younger than Charles Debarge. An electrician in the Aniche glass works, he was very serious and well read, a self-taught Communist intellectual who carefully prepared each attack, leaving little to chance, the complete opposite of Debarge, the improviser.

At the beginning, the OS groups in the Forbidden Zone used explosives which had been abandoned by the French army following its collapse in June 1940. However, they soon moved to stealing dynamite from the mines, like the attack on the *Compagnie des Mines de Drocourt*, which Debarge organised with twenty-seven others on 3 September 1941, making off with 247 kg of dynamite and 578 detonators.[65]

However, sabotage is not easy and could be very dangerous for the participants. On 11 October 1941, the premature explosion of a device that an OS group had just attached to a gasometer severely wounded René Denys and Béna Olejniczak and killed Paul Henke, a young German Communist. The help of railway workers and civil engineers was extremely useful in the early learning process. Two railwaymen from Amiens acted as consultants having perfected the best way to derail a train. It seems that you set off the explosive charge under the fifth wagon so that the train drags the engine backwards off the track, thereby causing maximum damage to the trains contents while giving the driver and fireman the best chance of survival. A group of Yugoslavian immigrants specialised in the destruction of electric pylons, while Eusébio Ferrari, always the perfectionist, developed his "cigar box" to detonate explosives just at the moment when the train arrived. But much of the sabotage was much less sophisticated and involved using pick-axes and sledgehammers to destroy roadside transformers.

The early sabotage activity was political, to encourage the population and to sap the moral of the German authorities and the French collaborators but, as the war progressed, the economic aspect grew in importance. France was by far the most important supplier

[64] "Carnets de Charles Debarge", quoted by Fossier, *Zone Interdite*, p.149.
[65] Pierrart André & Rousseau Michel, *Eusébio Ferrari*, Éditions Syros, Paris, 1980, p.146.

for the German war-machine and French industry worked flat out to supply the Third Reich. Thus, for the Nazis, social peace in France was a matter of strategic importance, so sabotage was a serious problem.

Faced with frequent attacks by Communist saboteurs, the German and Vichy authorities launched a man-hunt.[66] Félicien Joly, leader of the young Communists and one of the first to take up arms in the mining country, was also the first to fall in September 1941, followed shortly after by the Yugoslav group from Lens. The Nazis had dismantled the entire original OS network by August 1942 and had imprisoned or shot nearly all the militants. Eusébio Ferrari and René Denys fell in February 1942 and Charles Debarge was killed in a gunfight on 23 September 1942. His epitaph was written by his main enemy, the collaborationist préfet, Fernand Carles.

> *Instigator and author of outrages against members of the occupation authorities, he was certainly the most formidable terrorist chief in the region and perhaps in all France. His death is a serious blow for all those who are living illegally*.[67]

If these young men and women, equipped with only an old bicycle, an archaic revolver and some stolen explosives could achieve so much, one can only imagine their destructive capabilities if they had been well supplied with arms explosives and money. However, the Allied high command did not want to encourage working class resistance and preferred aerial bombardments of doubtful efficiency.

Émilienne Mopty

Émilienne Mopty

In the spring of 1942, the *Écho du Nord*, a collaborationist daily newspaper, published three photos while announcing a large reward to the informer who denounced two terrorists, Germinal Beudot and Moïse Boulanger, and a miner's wife, the mother of three children, Émilienne Mopty.

Who was this woman who attracted so much attention from the authorities?

As soon as the local Communists began producing roneoed leaflets, Émilienne Mopty distributed them in the mining town of Hénin-Liétard in the Pas-de-Calais. During the 1941 strike, she organised the 29 May demonstration of 2000 women in front of the head office of the mining company in Billy-Montigny. After the strike, she worked as a courier for OS and then the FTP. She was arrested by the *gendarmerie* on 14 May 1942, but managed to escape by jumping out of a toilet window. After this, she went into hiding,

[66] Noguères, *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, p. 132.
[67] Avakoumovitch Yvan & Bourderon Roger, *Détruire le PCF*, Éditions Sociales, Paris, 1988 p.178.

conducting numerous missions for the FTP until she was finally captured while smuggling weapons in Arras. She was beheaded on 18 January 1943 in Cologne prison. Five years later, when her body was eventually returned to Hénin-Liétard, her two sons were not able to attend the funeral as they were locked up in Béthune prison for their militant activities during the 1947 miners' strike[68].

Industrial Struggle

While the national line of the Communist party had been to prioritise the armed struggle over industrial action, this was not the case in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Despite the series of attacks and sabotage carried out by Charles Debarge and his comrades, many Communists had continued their agitation among the miners and the metalworkers, agitation which had culminated in February 1942 in a strike of 15,000 engineering workers in the largest factories in the Sambre basin.

There had been continual industrial skirmishes throughout 1941, which had greatly increased the workers' self-confidence. After discussions with workers in the principal factories of the Sambre basin, a Communist militant, Albert Maton, who had used his membership of the social committee in the factory where he worked to make a tour of the valley, posted a list of demands to the employers giving them 48 hours to respond. In the absence of a reply, he arranged for the widespread distribution of a leaflet calling for a general strike. The employers requested the intervention of the French police who arrested many Communists from their pre-1939 lists as well as a number of workers whose names were supplied by the employers, 400 in total. However, the strike was a success and the workers who had been arrested were released and many of the strikers' demands were met.[69]

Fives-Lille

One of the factories where the struggle over wages and conditions continued as it had before the war was the locomotive construction and repair plant at Fives, in the industrial suburbs of Lille. It employed 4,000 workers and was one of the largest railway engineering yards in France, with 80% of its production for the benefit of the German economy. Very early in the war, a Communist cell in the factory had established clandestine trade union organisation under the name of the *Comité de défense* (Defence committee). The workers had kept the pressure up throughout 1941 with five and ten minute strikes that, little by little, extended to a half-hour, then an hour.

In February 1942, François Lehideux, the Minister of Production in the Vichy government, visited the factory. He was welcomed by a barrage of boos and whistles and when he tried to address the workers through a megaphone, his speech was drowned in a

[68] Fossier, *Zone Interdite*, pp.347 - 350.
[69] Estager Jacques, *Ami entends-tu*, Editions Sociales, Paris 1984, p 125.

deafening racket of cat-calls. This enhanced the authority of the clandestine trade union, which now called itself *Union et Action* (Unity and Action), while sabotage increased and production levels declined.

During the night of 19-20 March 1942, twenty-seven workers were arrested. The following morning, a mass meeting in the factory voted for a strike against such repression and 4000 workers sat with their arms crossed in front of their machines. The German *Feldgendarmerie* invaded the factory in force, while the neighbourhood of Fives was placed under martial law. Despite the arrest of a further 342 workers and the execution by firing squad of Pierre Ochin, Maurice Lombert, Auguste Mars, Debruille and Haag, A. Deltête and Marcel Bouderiez, the sabotages continued the Five-Lille factory became one of the centres of the resistance in the Lille metropolis, with its own FTP unit.[70]

Skirmishing

After the strike of 1941, a skirmishing war broke out in the Pas-de-Calais "Black Country". Insufficient food for heavy work and an accompanying deep discontent led to a serious drop in production. Despite an increase in staffing from 94,000 in 1939 to 140,000 miners in the summer of 1943, daily production had reduced during the same period from 107,000 tons to 87,000.

The metalworking industry was also affected by strikes.

First half of 1942:

- 10 January - Thirty minute strike at *Compagnie de Fives-Lille* and the *Compagnie Lilloise de Moteurs*.
- 11 February - One hour strike at the *Compagnie Auxiliaire d'Électricité* in Lille and 4 metalworking establishments (3,700 strikers)
- 28 February - Strike at the *Société des Aciéries du Nord et de l'Est* in Louvroil.
- 3 March - Strike at the *Ateliers Centraux de Liévin* (107 strikers arrested). 30 minutes strike by 4,259 métallos at Maubeuge, Hautmont, Marpent, Jeumont and Feignies.
- 23 March - Half hour strike at *Compagnie de Fives-Lille* - 250 arrested. [see section above]
- 1 April - Strike at Drocourt and at pit 14 in Lens
- 6 / 7 April - Strike at pit 3 in Auchel, as well as 9 and 14 in Lens, and pits 1and 2 in Bully.[71]

Things then quietened down until late summer 1943.

During the first half of 1942, several women's demonstrations also took place to protest at the lack of food and coal. The official reports note:

[70] Estager, *Ami entends-tu*, p.126-7.
[71] Taylor, *Between Resistance and Collaboration*, pp.77-81.
Decriem, Bruno, "Les grèves de l'automne 43 dans le Nord-Pas-de-Calais", *Cahiers d'histoire*, #47, 1991 p. 78.

- End of January - 100 women at Armentières demanding coal.
- 2 February - 150 women at Hérin demanding potatoes
- 14 March - Women of Houplines protest at the lack of vegetables.
- 27 March - Marie Constant, member of the Communist party, led 100 women to protest in front of the *sous-préfecture* in Valenciennes about the lack of bread. Her husband was arrested.
- There is also a surviving leaflet, in the name of a "group of mothers in the Nord" calling a demonstration in Seclin at the end of March.[72]

The Employers

The German authorities compelled the French state to pay 20 million marks, 400 million francs, every day to cover the cost of occupying the country. This sum, 150 billion francs a year, represented more than the whole French budget in 1939, a period of massive rearmament. It has been calculated, given that a German soldier cost 22 francs a day including his pay, this sum would have permitted the German army to maintain 18 million men, while in fact the army of occupation never exceeded 300,000.[73] This meant that the French people not only paid for their own occupation, but that the Reich could obtain everything they needed in France without having to worry about the cost. However, this extortion did not affect the population equally and the big winners were the owners of the large industrial companies.

The authorities, both the occupation and the collaborators, repressed the trade unions and other independent workers' organisations as well as abolishing the social gains made during the Popular Front, allowing the employers to profit from the resulting cheap labour. Consequently, very few employers were supporters of the resistance and the bourgeois press loudly proclaimed that if they had to choose between the occupation of their factories by the workers or the occupation of the country by the Germans, they would always prefer the Nazis.[74] This attitude was particularly prevalent in an industrial region like the Nord-Pas-de-Calais and gave a patriotic edge to working class militant action.

Tactical assessment

The first half of 1942 had not gone well for the French Communist Party. It had not organised its rapid conversion to the armed struggle very well and had neglected workers' organisation and struggles. As a result, it had become isolated from its working class base. Even in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, where they had maintained their traditional industrial militancy, the party lost most of its experienced local leaders. Nevertheless, the northern Communists were the most active in the country and provided a model that Auguste

[72] Taylor, *Between Resistance and Collaboration*, pp.100-1.
[73] Rochebrune Renaud de & Hazera Jean-Claude, *Les Patrons sous l'Occupation*, Éditions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1995, p.p794-805.
[74] Matton, M, *Revue du Nord*, "L'Occupation en France et en Belgique 1940-44 (Tome 2)", No 2 (hors série), 1988 p.746-7 .

Lecœur could draw on when he was summoned to Paris in June 1942 to reorganise the organisational security of the PCF nationally.

With the death of Debarge, Ferrari, Joly and Hepiot, there was not only an organisational rupture, but also a political change in the revolutionary politics of the mining basin. Eusébio Ferrari never spoke of the "war", but always referred to the "revolution".[75] Charles Debarge used the slogan "for a France that is free and Communist".[76] The new generation of partisans followed the *Front National* line, as laid down by the leadership in Paris.

Front National

Roger Pannequin, a schoolteacher from Bully-les-Mines, who would become the leader of the FTP in the Pas-de-Calais described the new policy, entitled *Le Front National*, as:

> "*It was a matter of creating groups of civilians, unarmed for the moment, who would support mobile armed groups, the FTP detachments, by sheltering them, feeding them and conducting anti-German propaganda among the population*".[77]

The idea was to unite the maximum number of French people within a single organisation under Communist leadership. The *Front National* very quickly recruited non-Communists, often politically quite far away from the party, but who found it quite possible to ignore the leadership of the movement. For example, Jacques Debû-Bridel is quoted as saying:

> "*We wanted to fight the war, not take part in politics... We sought the most efficient means... The Communist Party, with its pre-existing secret organisation was the most efficient in France*".[78]

Le Front National pour l'Indépendance de la France had its original incarnation in an article in the PCF internal bulletin *La Vie du Parti* in May 1940:

"*It is necessary to unite the whole nation with the exception of traitors and capitulaters".*

But this first *Front National* was only a short-term manoeuvre before the invasion of the USSR and revealed its true intention several lines later:

> "*In order to carry out its mission as a liberator, the fundamental strength of Front National must be the French working class, with the Communist party at its head*".[79]

[75] Pierrart & Rousseau, *Eusébio Ferrari.*
[76] Pannequin, *Ami si tu tombes.*
[77] *Ibid.*, p258.
[78] Noguères, *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, p229.
[79] Courtois Stéphane, *Le PCF dans la Guerre*, Éditions Ramsay, Paris 1980, p191.

The first partial successes of the Allies in December 1941, the battle for Moscow and the relief of Tobruk, along with the US entry into the war following Pearl Harbour, gave the PCF the impression that Hitler would be beaten in 1942. This meant that they would not need any allies as it would be the others who would be isolated.

The possibility that the Nazis might be defeated lent a certain triumphalism to Stalin's speeches during the first half of 1942, a theme taken up by the PCF, which led to the prioritisation of the armed struggle over workers' mass action. However, small groups of armed militants, no matter how brave, are always easily isolated unless they have mass popular support and thus become easy prey for the authorities. The first half of 1942 was a disaster for the PCF as they lost the majority of their most experienced armed militants.

In the Pas-de-Calais, after the violent repression that had followed the strike of May-June 1941, the traditional solidarity of the mining communities actively supported the armed militants, themselves often miners, and allowed them to live "like fish in the water". Nevertheless, by September 1942, practically all the resistance fighters were in prison, shot as hostages or had died in combat. This catastrophic situation had forced the Communist Party to reconsider its strategy while, at the same time, events in the rest of the world had forced Stalin and de Gaulle to re-examine their own relationships. International events had their repercussions on working class politics in northern France.

The Rest of the World

On 21 June 1942, the British Army lost Tobruk in Libya and the advance of the *Afrika Korps* would only be stopped at El Alamein. This coincided with the summer offensive by the *Wehrmacht* in Russia which recuperated many of their losses of the previous winter. British imperialism was under threat in the Middle East which, with its oil reserves, was much more important than France. On 18 July 1942, Churchill informed Stalin that it would not be possible to open a second front in Europe that year, while Stalin and de Gaulle agreed in calling for of a second front in France as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the British, who were occupying Madagascar, Syria and Lebanon, refused to return these previously French colonies to the authority of the *Comité national de la France Libre* (National Committee of Free France), headed by de Gaulle, which the Allies did not recognise as a government in exile. So, when the Russian government did accord such recognition to the Free French, it encouraged the PCF leadership to seek a closer relationship with the Gaullist resistance in France. Gone was any talk of "France liberated and Communist", to be replaced with a policy of alliance and patriotism.

The Communist papers of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais followed this line when *L'Enchaîné du Nord* exclaimed:

> "*The French Communists are also patriotic, heirs to the purest traditions of our people, ready to sacrifice everything to free our nation from the odious invader*"

L'Avant-Garde put it more simply

"*Drive the* boches *out of France! France for the French*!"

The newspaper of the FN became *Le Patriote* and the partisans started to refer to themselves as "patriots". While they may have loyally followed the party line and called for unity with the Gaullists, in practice, the Communists of northern France were slow to put such unity into practice; old enmities died hard in the coal country.

The Wind of Change

This change of line coincided with spectacular changes internationally. The Allied victory in the second battle of El Alamein in November 1942 completely defeated the Italian and German forces in Africa, while the battle of Stalingrad gave proof, in February 1943 that the German army could lose a decisive battle. These events helped move French public opinion in favour of the resistance and the victories of the Red Army encouraged the Communists and gave them new prestige. Many people who had previously been passive started to believe that Hitler could be beaten.

The Nazi state was now on the defensive and the *Blitzkrieg* gave way to total economic war. The *Reich* then had a greater need for manpower than the German population could provide. They had tried to recruit workers during the early days of the occupation in an operation known as *la Relève*, which proposed to free French prisoners of war in exchange for volunteers who agreed to work in Germany, but which was a total fiasco. So, at the end of 1942, the new head of the Vichy government, Pierre Laval, set up the *Service civil national du Travail* (SCNT, National Civil Labour Service), which compelled each company to provide a contingent of workers who would be obliged to work in Germany.

In the Forbidden Zone, the clandestine Communist run newspapers l'*Enchainé*, *l'Avant-Garde* and *La Vie ouvrière du Nord* conducted an active campaign inciting workers to refuse to go. The Young Communists organised the distribution of leaflets in the railway stations among those waiting to go to Germany as well as taking practical measures to help those who defied the order. They found lodgings and hiding places, they fabricated false identity papers and distributed ration cards stolen from town halls by their comrades in the FTP. The revolt against these deportations was widespread and when the SCNT was renamed and enlarged as the *Service du travail obligatoire* (STO, Compulsory Work Service), it moved much of the population into active opposition to the occupation. Nationally, the STO was defied by nearly 200,000 young men, of whom approximately one quarter became full-time members of the French resistance, turning it into a real country-wide mass movement.

At the same time, the Anglo-American landings in French North Africa (*Afrique Française du Nord*, AFN) provoked the German army to invade the hitherto unoccupied

South of France, thereby demonstrating that the collaborationist Vichy government of Marshal Pétain was a mere puppet of the occupation forces. For the population of Northern France, this had been the majority opinion since the invasion, so the extension of the occupation reinforced their opposition and left them feeling considerably less isolated than before.

However, the landings in North Africa helped unite the forces of the French resistance when the US invaders gave control of the French North African colonies to Admiral Darlan, a collaborator who had once been Pétain's prime minister, but who happened, by chance, to be in Algiers when the invasion occurred.[80] General de Gaulle threatened a civil war and the BBC began censoring his broadcasts. On 24 December 1942, an Algerian Gaullist hit-squad assassinated Darlan and thereby opened the way to the unification of the resistance, in part because this terrorist action gave a certain legitimacy to the Communist armed campaign that had started at the Métro Barbès. In January 1943, Fernand Grenier, a pre-war Communist parliamentary deputy acting as the PCF representative in London, signed an agreement with General de Gaulle recognising

- The necessity of a national insurrection to liberate France.
- The absolute right of the people to decide their fate after the victory.[81]

In other words, the FTP could fight the Germans in their own way, while they gave an assurance that they would not use their military forces to seize power after the occupation ended. Both factions were in total agreement that they opposed US domination of France after the war.

FTP

Strengthened by this new atmosphere of unity, Charles Tillon, head of the National Military Committee (*Comité Militaire National*, CMN) of the FTP, began to reorganise the armed struggle. He had always opposed the large static camps, which the Gaullists and the *attentistes* recommended, preferring small, active and, above all, mobile guerrilla groups. So, in the spring of 1943, he issued the following instructions:

- Dispersal in small groups. Assembling in groups of more than thirty leads to unnecessary risk.
- The more mobile a unit is, the more possibilities exist for action
- Safety is guaranteed by offensive tactics.
- The best protection is liaison with the people.[82]

So, when Roger Pannequin and two Gaullists escaped from the prison at Huy in Belgium, he found a very different political situation in the Pas-de-Calais:

[80] Courtois, *Le PCF dans la Guerre*, p.302.
[81] Estager, *Ami entende-tu*, p135.
[82] Tillon, *On Chantait Rouge*, p.357.

"Our actions in 1941-42, while very effective, had cost the party dear. The Gestapo and the gendarmerie had practically liquidated the party's organisation in whole sectors of the mining basin. Hundreds and hundreds of Communist detainees who had been arrested during the summer months of 1942, filled the prisons at Douai, Béthune, Loos and Arras.

"The party could not carry on paying such a price and new rules of action and organisation were established. Everywhere, we tried to work in agreement with non-Communists".[83]

Charles Tillon's directives we, in large part, the result of the experience gained in the North of France where they were rapidly applied and sabotage recommenced with a renewed vigour. Thus, soon after his escape, Roger Pannequin became one of the leaders of the FTP, charged with relations with other resistance organisations. But the arrests and execution of hostages continued and Roger Pannequin himself was arrested again on 24 May 1944 and locked up in Cuincy prison. Nevertheless, he did not stay imprisoned for long as his comrade René Lanoy managed to free him by organising an attack on a police convoy.[84]

During this second wave of armed militancy, immigrant Communists came to the fore.

Main d'œuvre immigrée

In 1923, the PCF had set up an association for immigrant workers, *Main d'œuvre immigrée* (MOI, Immigrant Workforce), which was organised in language sections. The MOI provided a large number of the FTP militants, particularly in Paris. However, in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the Polish and Italian workers were well integrated into the labour movement and the majority of the immigrant combatants joined the regular FTP.

It is difficult to establish an accurate list of the sabotages carried out by the Polish FTP-MOI, however the management of the French Railways, SNCF, reported that, of the 140 sabotages in the Arras region in 1942-43, 22 were the responsibility of groups in which Poles were the main combatants. In 1944, FTP-MOI groups based in the Nord attacked the railway lines Somain-Valenciennes, Somain-Cambrai and Cambrai-Douai as well as canals and electric pylons. The Pas-de-Calais groups specialised in the sabotage of the lines Lens-Arras, Lens-Lille and Amiens-Paris.

The Polish units followed the new instructions to limit their attacks to infrastructure which served the German army but not to destroy any installations which would be useful to rebuild the French economy after the war.[85]

[83] Pannequin, *Ami si tu tombes*, p.258.
[84] Deregnaucourt, Gilles, "Roger Pannequin dit « commandant Marc ». Une grande figure de la Résistance dans le Bassin minier", *Gauheria*, n° 50, August 2002.
[85] Zamojski J. "La participation des Polonais à la Résistance dans le Pas-de-Calais et le Nord (1940-1944)" *Revue du Nord*, tome 57, n°226, July-September 1975. pp. 448-54.

Nevertheless, a section of the MOI was formed in the region, under the leadership of Eugenia Łozińska and Jan Gerhard, to aid the recruitment of Polish workers and to shelter the Russian prisoners of war who escaped from forced labour camps, where they had been put to work to help build the Atlantic Wall. Escaping Red Army soldiers made an important contribution to the strength of the FTP in 1943-44 and the MOI was able to provide their Soviet comrades with Polish identities.

The Nord-Pas-de-Calais had become a vast labour camp, with Soviet prisoners of war making up the largest group of unpaid forced labourers in the region. By mid-1942, there were over 30,000 Soviet POWs working and living in deplorable conditions, initially working in the coal-mines and later in constructing the Atlantic Wall. Their treatment aroused considerable solidarity from the population of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, particularly among the miners alongside whom they were working. This started with the sharing of the meagre food and tobacco rations, but soon advanced to assisting sabotage and escapes. The majority of the escapees joined the FTP and became part of the elite armed groups, their previous military experience and desperate circumstances making them ideal commandos.

In December 1943, the *Comité Central des Prisonniers de Guerre Soviétiques* (Central Committee of Soviet Prisoners of War) was set up in Paris under the auspices of the MOI. Its main tasks were to organise partisan detachments, ensure their integration with the French resistance movement and to distribute propaganda and organise clandestine committees in the labour camps. To aid this work, the committee published an underground newspaper, *Совετский патриот - Le Patriote soviétique*.

Alexis Kochetkov, a member of the *Comité Central des Prisonniers de Guerre Soviétiques* tells us:

> *I was taken from one hideout to the next, from one clandestine comrade to another. Speaking on behalf of the Central Committee, I sought information, distributed propaganda and encouraged militant activity, either in person of via intermediaries. I criss-crossed the Nord-Pas-de-Calais hunting for new contacts.*

Acts of sabotage in the camps were organised by special groups; by the end of 1943, there were forty Soviet sabotage groups active in the camps of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Each camp had an escape committee charged not only with organising escapes, but also liaising with the French resistance on the exterior. Once they had escaped, their partisan activity was divided into four sectors, Billy-Montigny, Béthune, Bapaume and d'Avesnes-le-Comte. There were two to four detachments in each sector, each detachment composed of twenty to thirty militants. Vassili Porik, a lieutenant in the Red Army who had escaped from the camp at Beaumont en Artois, was in overall command of the Soviet partisans in northern France. His official citation records that his partisans killed 250 German soldiers,

derailed 10 trains, blew up two railway bridges and burnt 14 lorries as well as capturing a large quantity of weapons. He was captured by the Gestapo on 22 July 1944 and shot the same day.[86]

From May to August 1944, a group of forty men commanded by Alex Tkatchenko, an escaped prisoner of war, was active in the area around Noeux-les-Mines. This maquis killed a number of German soldiers and known collaborators as well as sabotaging the railways. Tkatchenko was killed by German *Feldgendarmes* 18 August 1944 at Berles-au-Bois along with his French liaison officer.[87]

Vassili Porik

Soviet partisans were also actively involved in encouraging desertions among the Russian and Ukrainian soldiers enrolled in the SS. The approach seems to have been one of carrot and stick; some leaflets appealed to their patriotism and drew attention to their poor treatment by their German officers, while others reminded them of their likely fate should Germany lose the war.[88]

There are 200 graves in the cemetery of Haubourdin in the Pas-de-Calais of Soviet partisans killed in action or murdered by the Gestapo after capture.

Operational independence

Despite a theoretical military command structure, the activities of the FTP were, of necessity, local initiatives because of the security requirements of an underground war. Nevertheless, there was a common political line and a generally similar approach.

Roger Pannequin recounts the following incident:

> *One day, a discussion took place on the need to kill some collaborators. In the heat of the debate, I banged the table shouting that it was scandalous that Deroubaix, Mayor of Grenay, should still be alive when, in 1941 he had boasted that he wished that he could take part in the arrest of Julien Hapiot. Julien had been shot while Deroubaix still walked around town. Several days later, I bumped into my friend Daniel at Liévin. As he got back on his bicycle, he asked:*
>
> > *Your bloke at Grenay, what did you call him? Deroubaix? Yes, that's it.*
> >
> > *Well, last night someone took him out.*
> >
> > *Good, one less.*

[86] Anastasia Pavlova. *Les Russes et les Soviétiques en France durant la Seconde guerre mondiale : entre collaboration et résistance*. Histoire, 2015.
Laroche Gaston, *On les nommait des étrangers*, Paris, Les Editeurs Français Réunis, 1965, pp.238-300.
[87] Lesage, René, *Des Ukrainiens dans la Résistance du Pas-de-Calais*, Lille, l'Université de Lille-III, 2009.
[88] Pavlova. *Les Russes et les Soviétiques en France durant la Seconde guerre mondiale,* pp.78-80.

But that is not all, on their way back, the boys visited a Polish collaborator called Dvorak and killed him as well.

That was how instructions were interpreted.[89]

Service du Travail Obligatoire

By 1943, the losses on the Eastern front resulted in the German government deciding to implement a programme of forced recruitment of labour from France to compensate for their lack of manpower in German industry. This measure would have unintended detrimental effects on the German war effort.

The *Service du Travail Obligatoire* (STO), started in February 1943, was the organisation set up by the Vichy government to organise the dispatch of forced labour from France to Germany. Some 600,000 French workers were sent to Germany in 1943 and 1944. Another 200,000 managed to evade the round-up and these young men formed the basis for the massive increase in the rural resistance. This round-up and deportation to what was essentially slave labour, initially enforced by the French Police and *Gendarmerie* and later aided by French fascist paramilitaries, such as the *Milice* and *Parti populaire français*, (PPF, French Popular Party) as well as the German armed forces, was massively unpopular and may be seen as an important turning point in alienating French public opinion from the Vichy government of Maréchal Pétain. There was a severe shortage of labour in the country as a million and a half French soldiers were still being held in German POW camps. The *réfractaires*, as those fleeing the STO were called, were sheltered in rural areas in return for their labour on farms and it was a natural step to supporting them as they took to the hills and forests when the Vichy authorities came looking for them. In turn it was logical for these *réfractaires* to arm themselves against the forces of repression. They then quickly turned from defence to attack, from being the hunted to the hunters.

In some ways, the existence of the rural resistance can be seen as a form of large scale collective action, a form of community civil disobedience.[90] The German authorities certainly saw the situation as a rural revolt and treated the peasants in the villages with extreme brutality. There was a general policy of burning villages and massacring civilians in areas of strong Maquis activity in an attempt to terrorise the base of support of the guerrilla bands.

This growth of a rural guerrilla movement was also an opportunity for the hard-pressed urban terrorist networks to send at least some of their fighters into the hills to train and lead these groups of militarily inexperienced young men.

[89] Pannequin, *Ami si tu tombes*, p.305.

[90] Kedward, H. R., *In search of the Maquis : Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942-1944*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

The Second "Grande Grève"

The armed struggle may have suffered a setback in 1942, but the efforts of the underground trade union organisation started to bear fruit and, once again, it was the miners who led the way.

On 12 September 1943, the German authorities informed the miners that they would be expected to work on Sundays, an announcement that produced widespread absenteeism and strikes in 11 pits: in the Nord, at Notre-Dame, Desjardin, Bernard, Renard, Bonnel, Lenclos, Audiffret, Saint-Marc and in the Pas-de-Calais, pit 24 at Courrières, 4 at Carvin and 7 at Wingles.

A second attempt by the occupants and the employers on 8 October caused a strike at Nœux-les-Mines and Bruay. The *Wehrmacht* occupied the mines that afternoon and set up heavy machine guns around the pit heads. Alongside the refusal to work on Sundays, the strikers raised other demands relating to their working conditions as well as health and safety.

One such list of demands addressed to the mine management:

- Linking of wages to the cost of living, that is a 50% increase, with all bonuses consolidated into the basic wage
- Increased food provision, 800 grams of bread per day, 300 grams of meat, double the cooking fat provision and an increase of 25 kilos of potatoes per week.
- No working on Sundays and public holidays.
- The end to fines and other punishments that we suffer too often.
- More and better soap, overalls and espadrilles whenever we need them.
- Real measures of health and safety in order to end the accidents which we suffer too frequently.
- The freedom of all prisoners and deportees from both this strike and from 1941.[91]

On 10 October, the clandestine union organisation called a general strike in the mining basin. It was particularly well followed in the Pas-de-Calais in the mines of Béthune, Bray and Lens. In the Nord, it affected the pits Saint-René, Sainte-Marie, Vuillemain, Desjardin, Delbroye in the Douaisis, Aremberg, Sabatier, Thiers, La Grange and la compagnie Vicoigne in the Valenciennois.

Before work started again on 20 October, 50,000 miners took part in the strike, suffering 800 arrests. The threat of Sunday working was abandoned, the miners' wages were increased by 18% and they were given an issue of shoes and overalls. The *Reich* lost 280,000 tons of coal and the railway workers from the depots in Lens and Béthune launched a solidarity strike on 16th October.[92]

[91] Estager, *Ami entends-tu*, p. 146.

[92] Decriem, Bruno, "Les grèves de l'automne 43 dans le Nord-Pas-de-Calais", *Cahiers d'histoire*, 1991, N° 47 - Les luttes des mineurs de 1940 à 1944.
Taylor, *Between Resistance and Collaboration*, pp. 82-7.

There was also widespread industrial action on 11 November 1943, anniversary of the surrender of the German forces at the end of the First World War, which must have been particularly irritating for the occupying authorities, deliberately so. There was a 24 hour strike in the engineering factories in Tourcoing, with a one hour strike from 11am to 12 noon in most industries in Lille, Tourcoing and the Sambre basin.[93]

The PCF did not have a great influence among the railway workers of the Forbidden Zone; they stayed loyal to their pre-war reformist representatives, above all to Augustin Lamand from Lens. However, Lamand and his SFIO comrades were not the typical bureaucrats, but honest trade unionists who had entered the resistance early on.[94] They distributed propaganda leaflets and clandestine newspapers, they organised solidarity with the miners and maintained communication between the Forbidden Zone and the rest of France. A group of railway workers helped the armed groups by training them to derail trains and sabotage the railway. Their October 1943 strike lasted 5 days.

Unity

It is one thing to advocate unity, it is another thing to achieve it.

At national level, discussions between the two factions of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) began in January 1943, but as well as the bitterness and recriminations arising from the expulsion of the *unitaires* in September 1939, there were differences in practical activity under the occupation which also stood in the way of a rapprochement. Nevertheless, on 17 April 1943, the signing of the *Accords du Perreux* by Robert Bothereau and Louis Saillant for the *confédérés*, and Henri Raynaud and André Tollet of the PCF for the *unitaires* in April 1943 theoretically reunified the CGT.

In the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, particularly in the mining basin, the events of the period of the Hitler-Stalin pact had left a legacy of bitterness, when the socialists and their allies, the *confédérés*, had profited from the disarray of the *unitaires* and the Communists to help the *préfet* remove them from their trade union and municipal posts. This was exacerbated by the perceived treason of René Belin, a one-time leader of the moderate wing of the CGT who had become the Vichy Minister of Labour and signed the decree abolishing the trade unions in November 1940. One of Belin's close associates, a Julien Jérémie Priem, lived in Lens and had been the target of one of Roger Pannequin's first assassination attempts in September 1941.[95] However, not all of the *confédérés* were collaborators and they did publish a clandestine journal, *La Résistance ouvrière*, but it was mainly concerned with discussions about how to rebuild society after an Allied victory rather than organising the day to day struggle.

[93] *La Résistance ouvrière*, 15 December 1943.
[94] https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article5491.
[95] *Ibid*., p.120.

The Communist press of the region had conducted merciless attacks on the local SFIO leaders, irrespective of whether they were sympathetic to Vichy or not.

For example:

> *The traitors Dumoulin, Legay, Priem and their like who have proved once more their willingness to collaborate with the slave-driving of the Hitlerite cannibals.*[96]

A *confédéré* by the name of Catteau, was appointed to preside over the reunification in the Pas-de-Calais. The PCF leadership in Paris advanced the policy of letting bygones be bygones, but this fell on deaf ears in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Another *confédéré*, Augustin Lamand, was appointed his deputy. He a member of the SFIO and active in the resistance with *Libération-Nord.* As mentioned above, he was leader of the clandestine union organisation among the railway workers of Béthune. Despite this good reputation and the solidarity that Lamand had organised in support of the miners, the Communists in the miners' union opposed his appointment and, by way of compromise, a Communist, Caron, was made general secretary of the departmental trade union structure[97]. These bureaucratic manoeuvres would be important after the liberation, but in 1943, the initiative still rested with the rank and file.

The politics of national unity and the creation of the Front National was an attempt to face up to the reality of the occupation while, at the same time conforming to the demands of Soviet diplomacy. The agreement between de Gaulle and the PCF which resulted from this position gave the General the title of *Chef de la France Libre* and thus lent a semblance of truth to the myth. In fact, Charles de Gaulle was a consummate politician who knew exactly how best to manipulate the forces at his disposal in order to give himself the maximum political advantage and to present himself as the national hero, the only person capable of uniting the French nation.

The idea of national unity was reinforced by the attitude of US imperialism. Once they had entered the war, the US government had the intention of becoming the dominant power in the world. They became the dominant partner in an alliance with the British empire in exchange for their economic aid in the dark days following the fall of France and the massive defeat at Dunkirk. A cheaply purchased servility that survives to this day. The demand for the unconditional surrender of Germany, which was the official position of the Allies, was also born out of the US government's desire for global hegemony. One reason for the interminable delay in organising the second front in Normandy was the possibility of exhausting the USSR so that it would not be a competitor in the post-war world. In the event, when the Normandy landings took place, the Soviet advance into Germany made the US government fearful that the Russians could win by themselves and that this would give Stalin too much influence in Europe.

[96] *L'Enchaîné du Pas-de-Calais*, 9 October1941.
[97] Dejonghe, Étienne et Laurent Daniel, *Liberation du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais*,Hachette, Paris, 1974 p.74.

In these circumstances, the last thing that the US government wanted was a re-emergent French imperialism. Of course, de Gaulle and Roosevelt mutually detested each other, but this feeling was largely based in their imperialist rivalry. So, de Gaulle needed the resistance to give him a place at the table among the victorious allies, but at the same time had to make sure that the national rebellion did not flow over into a social revolution. This explains the reluctance to send arms drops to the FTP while endeavouring to maintain friendly relations.

The intention of the US government to impose a military administration on France proved not to be possible in the face of the reality of the resistance. One can imagine the reaction in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, after four years of German occupation, if they had been confronted with an attempt to assert US control.

Strikes or Direct Action

There was a tradition of sabotage in the French working class movement dating back to the turn of the century when the CGT was largely a revolutionary syndicalist organisation. However, what they meant by "sabotage" was much more akin to action that, in the UK context, would be called a "go-slow" or "work-to-rule", or in the delightful expression from the Argentine workers' movement, "working without enthusiasm". The main proponent of the idea in France, Emile Pouget, based his advocacy of the tactic on the experience of the Glasgow dockers in the 1890s, using the slogan "Bad pay, Poor work".[98] It is always hard to quantify this form of industrial action, indeed the whole point is to avoid victimisation, and so the only way the employers become aware of the situation is when their production levels drop. The German occupation authorities were convinced that the fall in production in the mines of northern France was due to "*flâneurs*", idlers. The drop in production was in fact quite significant. In April 1940, 146,000 miners produced 3,128,146 tonnes of coal a month, in December 1943, 161,457 miners only produced 2,289,243 tonnes.[99] Working without enthusiasm, indeed.

The authorities saw little difference between such deliberately reduced production and the more violent destructions that we now commonly think of as sabotage. We have discussed above the train derailments, the destruction of electricity installations and arson. This so-called sabotage does not have a long history in the French working class movement, there is no equivalent of the British machine-breakers such as the Luddites or Captain Swing, although there are recorded incidents, such as the 1911 railway strike, where the strikers took home essential pieces of machinery that rendered the apparatus temporarily useless, rather in the manner of the removal of the plugs from the steam engines in the 1841 general strike in England.

[98] Brown, Geoff, *Sabotage, a Study in Industrial Conflict*, Nottingham: Spokesman, 1977, chapter 1.
[99] Dejonghe Étienne. "Les problèmes sociaux dans les entreprises houillères du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais durant la seconde guerre mondiale" *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, vol 18 N°1, 1971. pp. 124-147.

Thus, I would argue, sabotage in the sense of a go-slow was well within the French working class tradition, while destruction of property and armed attacks on German soldiers and fascist collaborators were a direct product of war-time conditions.

Was there a contradiction between organising mass action and the armed struggle? In practice, the two tactics could continue in parallel. Certain well organised workplaces had the solidarity to keep up a fairly constant level of industrial action with occasional outbreaks of wider strike action or demonstrations. But there was always a price to pay and the clandestine leadership was always in danger of arrest. This meant that, if they got word of their impending victimisation, they would go on the run. In these circumstances, it would be natural to arm oneself for self-defence and it is then only a short step to going on the offensive; anyone fearless and determined enough to be a clandestine workplace militant is unlikely to sit in an attic awaiting the end of the war.

The STO forced labour deportations provoked a large number of young people to go into hiding. Given the unsuitability of the terrain in northern France for guerrilla warfare, the resistance helped many of these *réfractaires* to get to more mountainous areas in the south and a number of more experienced fighters from the mining communities, who had made their home region too hot for their continued presence, also went south to use their experience in the armed struggle to train and lead guerrilla bands in the more rural south.

Those who stayed in the north were able to rely on the traditional solidarity of the mining communities, while the elan of the early urban guerrillas such as Debarge, Ferrari, Joly and Hepiot developed into a more professional approach. The change in political justification for armed attacks and sabotage with the full implementation of the "Popular Front" line also had an effect, as the idea behind the activity moved from a belief that it was aiming at a revolution towards support for an allied victory.

Meanwhile, the underground shop stewards' movement in northern France continued to organise in the workplace and would be ready for an offensive in the spring and summer of 1944. There were, of course, parallel movements in Belgium and it may be interesting to see how the neighbouring region compared, given the similarity of the strikes of May 1941.

Belgium

Front de l’Indépendance

In May 1941, the Belgian Communist Party published a "Manifesto to the Peoples of Flanders and Wallonia for the Independence of the Country". The attack on the USSR by Nazi Germany on June 22, 1941 gave the Communists the impetus to find allies in the resistance movement. The *Front Wallon pour la Libération du Pays* (Walloon Front for the Liberation of the Country), was officially announced in the Liège underground newspaper

La Meuse in October 1941. This united Communists and Wallon activists, anti-fascist intellectuals and "Anglophiles", serving as a model for the *Front de l'Indépendance* (Independence Front), which was established in March 1942. However, the underground, social democratic *Parti Ouvrier Belge* (POB, Belgian Workers' Party) and the right-wing nationalist groups refused to join an organization set up by Communists, which meant that, initially, it had to rely on individual recruitment.

The introduction of deportations and forced labour in Germany from October 1942 changed the situation. In particular, the involvement of the *Front de l'Indépendance* in the fight against deportation through the creation of committees to help the *réfractaires*, those refusing the call-up for forced labour, allowed it to gradually spread among large sections of the population from the spring of 1943. It acted mainly in the fields of propaganda and humanitarian resistance. Thus, in 1943 and 1944, 150 clandestine leaflets were produced, they also helped the families of political prisoners, hid Jews escaping deportation through *Comité de Défense des Juifs* (CDJ, the Committee for the Defence of the Jews), looked after resistance fighters and hid escaped Russian forced labourers.[100] The *Comités de Lutte Syndicale* (CLS) in the workplaces and the urban guerrilla *Partisans Armés* (PA) were technically part of the *Front de l'Indépendance*, but in practice were autonomous.

The Industrial Front

The mass arrests of June 1941, Operation *Sonnenwende*, do not seem to have greatly intimidated the Belgian miners and metalworkers. Five thousand miners in the Borinage held a two day strike on 17-18 July and 1,500 miners in the Charleroi region struck on 5 August. The Liège region was back in militant action in October with strikes of both miners and the Cockerill steel workers who had played so prominent a role in the May 1941 events.

Strikes in various industries, mainly in the French-speaking south of Belgium, continued throughout the autumn and winter of 1941-42. The main grievances were over food and coal rations and heating in workplaces. *Le Drapeau Rouge* reported around half dozen important strikes every month.[101] One area with a particularly militant record was Verviers in Liège province, with strikes in April 1942 starting in the textile industry, then spreading to engineering workers and the railway. There was inevitably widespread industrial action on May Day.

One group of workers who were noted for their early strike action were the postal workers in Brussels. Action in September 1941 resulted in a 10% wage increase and a bonus of 150 francs for the married men. Another strike over Christmas and New Year was

[100] Gotovitch, *Du Rouge au Tricolore*, pp.195-246.

[101] Most of the accounts of strikes in this section are based on reports in the PCB newspaper *Le Drapeau Rouge*. As these reports were seen as a means of extending Communist influence, they have to be accurate. Any inaccuracy undermines this tactic fatally and so this can be considered a reliable source of information. An almost complete archive of *Le Drapeau Rouge* can be found on the "Belgian War Press" website - https://warpress.cegesoma.be/en/node/45857.

also settled to the workers' satisfaction. August 1942 saw another postal strike, this time winning a shoe allowance and a loan of 1000 francs.[102] July 1942 was particularly active. The strike started in the Basse-Sambre mining basin with 35 pits striking for 10 days losing 200,000 tons of coal production. The action spread to 8 pits in the Charleroi coalfield and several engineering factories in the Centre province.

The *Fédération des Métallurgistes de Liège* (FML, Metalworkers Federation of Liège), the engineering workers federation of the pre-war CGTB, had fallen into decline and was nearly wiped out by a series of arrests on 23 March 1942. With the old leaders arrested, a young militant, André Renard, took the lead. He already had a good local reputation from his militancy in the 1936 strikes and he managed to rebuild the FML from the base, encouraging the formation of works committees and distributing a regular stencil duplicated bulletin, *Le Métallurgiste*. Deportations for forced labour in Germany gave the FML its first real test.[103]

In March 1942, the occupying authorities started to recruit forced labour to work in factories in Germany as the losses on the Eastern Front led to a labour shortage when German workers were drafted into the *Wehrmacht*. Working class opposition to these deportations came to a head in November 1942, starting in Cockerill near Liège again, with a strike against the deportation of workers from the factory. This spread to other local factories and mines and the Verviers rail workers joined the action. The occupation forces took hostages from among the workers, but when this had no effect on the strike, they released them and put back the deportations to February 1943. The experience of joint action between the *Fédération des Métallurgistes de Liège* and the *Comités de Lutte Syndicale des métallurgistes* (CLS) in Liège led first to the CLS being given delegates on the action committee of the FML and eventually to a joint organisation. This fusion gave an impetus to the clandestine workers' organisation in the region and workplace committees were formed in many new factories. By the end of 1943, the FML had 12,000 dues paying members.[104]

Strikes against forced labour in Germany spread to other regions. At the *Fabelta* factory in Brussels, German recruiters demanded thirty women to work in an aircraft factory in Leipzig. All the women went on strike enabling the women who had been designated to flee. There were reports of a number of other strikes against forced labour in Germany in December and January 1943, including tramway and railway workers refusing to transport the deportees. In February, at the *ACE* factory in Charleroi, 4,500 workers

[102] Gotovitch, *Du Rouge au Tricolore,* pp.268-9.
[103] Hemmerijckx, Rik. "Le Mouvement syndical unifié et la naissance du renardisme", *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, vol. 1119-1120, no. 14, 1986, pp. 22-3.
[104] *Ibid*. pp. 24-6.

went on strike against the threat to deport 1,200 of them. Also in February there are reports of 60,000 metalworkers on strike in Liège province, the third strike in 3 months.[105]

May Day 1943 was again widely celebrated, but this was the last of the large-scale, almost general, strikes. Thereafter sporadic action continued over the summer of 1943 in the mines and engineering, mainly short stoppages, go-slows and delegations to management, normally over wage demands, frequently successful. While the action was mainly concentrated in the more industrial French speaking south, there was a level of militancy in the ports and dockyards of Antwerp and Bruges/Zeebrugge.

The final widespread action started in October 1943 with a campaign for a 2000 franc bonus. This seems to have struck a chord with many workers and *Le Drapeau Rouge* has a significant list of workplaces involved, including the inevitable Cockerill, but also in workforces not previously much involved, including the Flanders textile industry and the railways. This campaign had mixed results but with some reported successes.

In 1944, the massive aerial bombardments by the Allied air-forces disrupted production more or less completely and forced the workers' organisations onto the defensive, mainly pushing demands for pay for time spent in air-raid shelters. During this period, the PCB seemed to lose touch, concentrating on calls for the formation of *Milices patriotiques* and for *L'Insurrection nationale,* calls which did not elicit a great response. Those workers who were likely to take up arms seem to have done so already.

The Armed Struggle

After the invasion of the Soviet Union, the armed struggle, sabotage and attacks on collaborators were organised by the *Partisans Armés* (PA, Armed Partisans), set up by the PCB and led by Buntea Crupnic a Jewish immigrant from Bessarabia.

Buntea Crupnic
with the PCB National War Secretariat Xavier Relecom, Joseph Leeman, Pierre Bosson

Urban terrorism did not start in the same dramatic fashion in Belgium as it had in France. The first subject of an assassination was not a German soldier, but Jean Odekerken, a leading Belgian Rexist collaborator, who was killed by a parcel bomb on 1 October 1941. The *Parti Rexiste* was a far-right Catholic, nationalist, authoritarian political party, based on the Italian fascists, that provided many of the more ardent collaborators. The *Légion Wallonie*, a paramilitary organization which later became the "Wallonien" Division of the *Waffen SS* was closely associated with the *Parti Rexiste* and the early armed actions of the PCB were primarily aimed at these fascist collaborators.

[105] Gotovitch, *Du Rouge au Tricolore,* p.231.

However, the majority of attacks targeted property rather than individuals, reflecting both the preferences of the militants and the balance of forces. So, the *Partisans Armés* concentrated initially on setting fires in warehouses of material destined for Germany and the logistics required by the *Wehrmacht* such as lorry parks, railway premises, telephone lines and electricity cables. The combination of dynamite, detonators and Communists in the mines produced considerable sabotage.

Georges Cordier, previously PCB parliamentary deputy for Mons-Borinage, set up an action group which was responsible for 15 sabotage actions, including attacks on the *Quaregnon* power plant and the *Carbochimique* plant in Tertre. Following the theft of 450 sticks of dynamite from the coal mine in Boussu, German police forces carried out a major operation which led to the arrest on November 29, 1941 of 16 people. Georges Cordier was among those arrested and dynamite was found in the house where he had been hiding. He was killed in prison on 8 December 1941, five activists were shot on 28 December and eleven more on 21 January. *Le Drapeau Rouge* announced: "Communists do not cry for their dead, they avenge them" and in March 1942, Jean Dehrareng, a Communist factory worker from Liège, killed two Rexist police informers and *SS Hauptscharführer* Dümke, only to be shot down himself in the street on 27 April 1942.

March-April 1942 also saw a series of bomb attacks in Brussels against Rexists and volunteers for the Eastern Front. Mayday 1942 was celebrated with some spectacular attacks on electrical supply transformers and railway lines, and in November of that year a number of collaborationist mayors were shot. The occupation authorities responded by shooting 68 hostages between November 42 and January 43. However, the German authorities were not overly bothered about protecting collaborators and, after the *Partisans Armés* stopped shooting German soldiers, the executions were much reduced and, thereafter, the partisans concentrated on sabotage of the infrastructure.

The *Partisans Armés* suffered a severe blow in July 1943 when a number of their leaders were arrested along with some of the leadership of the Communist party in a series of raids by the German police, however they recovered relatively quickly and returned to their previous levels of activity. At the end of the war, it was recognised that 13,246 persons had been members of the *Partisans Armés*, half of whom were captured and one in five were killed. An important component of the partisan movement in Brussels were young Jewish fighters, mainly refugees from Germany, Austria and Poland. This squad was known as the *Corps Mobile* and was led by Todor Angelov, a Bulgarian anarchist. Unusually, this anarchist exercised considerable influence on the Communist leadership of the *Partisans Armés.* He was captured during the July 1943 round-up and executed in November of that year. He strongly opposed attacks on German soldiers, arguing that

attempts should be made to win them over to desertion or mutiny, a position adopted by the PCB leadership.[106]

Todor Angelov was born in 1900 in Kyustendil in Bulgaria. As a student, he joined the Bulgarian Anarchist Communist Federation (FACB). In 1923 he took part in the September Uprising and in 1925 he had to flee abroad with a price on his head, settling in Belgium in 1927. He fought in the Dimitrov battalion of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War, but remained in Spain after the International Brigades were withdrawn in September 1938, working with Spanish anarchists until forced to leave in April 1939.

Todor Angelov

Returning to Belgium, in 1942 he organised a group of 25 combatants, mainly East European Jews, into the first guerrilla squad that acted on Belgian territory against the Nazis. It mostly operated around Brussels, and carried out 200 actions including the destruction of records of Belgian Jews. He was captured in early 1943 and held in the prison camp at Fort Breendonk. He was executed by the Gestapo on November 30th, 1943.

At the end of the war, he was declared a "national hero of Belgium" and a monument was erected to him at Schaerbeek, in the suburbs of Brussels conurbation, where he had lived.[107]

There were also nearly 1000 Soviet partisans who fought in the Belgian resistance. They were mainly escapees from forced labour the coal mines of Limbourg and Hainault, although some had escaped across the border from northern France. The most famous group were based in Rebecq, where they formed part of the local *Partisans Armés* led by André Kestemont. A commemorative plaque was erected in 2019 nearby the tomb of one of their number, Vladimir Talda, who was killed in action.

Ivan Alexandrovitch Bashkatov

Wounded during the German invasion of the USSR in June 1941, Ivan Bashkatov was sent to a POW camp in Poland, then in 1943 he was transferred to Charleroi to work in a coal mine. He recalled: "The Belgians gave us food...this gave me hope and allowed me to think of escape". With three comrades he climbed over the wall, bullets whistling round their ears. After hiding for three days, along with five other escapees, they managed to contact the Belgian resistance at Pont-à-Celles. "The Belgians directed our operations.

[106] Gotovitch, *Du rouge au tricolore*, pp.155-194.
[107] https://libcom.org/history/angelov-dzekov-todor-aka-bozhana-aka-labourer-1900-1943.

We were active by night, in the rain and in the fog. We were prepared to do anything against the enemy". Ivan Bashkatov was keen to emphasise the heroism of the Belgians who protected the escapees. The Soviet partisans in turn took responsibility for sabotage and transporting armaments. He remained in Pont-à-Celles after the war, marrying Michelle, the daughter of the Belgian resistance activists who hid him, and working as an engineer until his retirement.[108]

Shamefully, when they returned to the USSR, most of these partisans received no credit of their resistance activities, despite glowing commendations from the French and Belgian Communist Parties. Many were imprisoned in Siberian internment camps until the 1960s.

Travail Allemand

In August 1940, the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD, Communist Party of Germany) established a new leadership in exile in Toulouse in the South of France, which sent Max Stoye and Philipp Kohl to Belgium to contact the PCB and to organise those German-speaking comrades living in exile in Belgium. This led to the creation of *Le Travail Allemand* (TA, literally "German Work"), having as its object to undermine the *Wehrmacht*, eventually to promote dissidence, desertions and mutinies. The main means of achieving this was a roneoed newsletter, *Die Wahrheit* (The Truth), the oldest surviving copy of which dates to August 1942. It then appeared more or less regularly until August 1944, with the subheading *Nachrichten für Deutsche und Österreichische Soldaten* (News for German and Austrian soldiers) until January 1943 when it changed to *Organ der Vereinigten Soldatenausschüsse in Belgien* (Organ of the United Soldiers' Committees in Belgium) and finally, from December 1943, *Organ des Nationalkomitees freies Deutschland in Belgien* (Organ of the National Committee for Free Germany in Belgium). The content, however, was more or less the same throughout: news of German defeats in Africa and the Soviet Union; the exploits of partisans in Yugoslavia, Greece and France; a gleeful account of the fall of Mussolini; exhortations to desert on the Eastern Front or to the partisans. Most editions contained a section calling for freedom for Austria. There was no mention of socialism, the political line was that of the "Popular Front" and the main argument was that the true patriot is he who fights against National Socialism to save Germany.

The *Travail Allemand* organisation in Belgium operated independently of the German and Austrian refugee fighters in the *Partisans Armés* nor did it have any direct political links with the PCB which did, however supply finance, printing facilities, false ration and identity cards, as well as safe houses. *Le Drapeau Rouge* had a special edition in January 1943 extolling the virtues of the German anti-Nazi resistance and quoting extensively from

[108] Jean-Louis, "Les partisans soviétiques et la libération de la Belgique", *Revue Méthode*, April-May 2020, pp.186-192.

Die Wahrheit. In the front line of the *Travail Allemand* operation were about 70 young women, mainly of Jewish heritage, 20 Germans and 50 Austrians. After the war, Herta Stuberg, activist in *Travail Allemand* in Belgium, reports that this mission was very difficult and dangerous for several reasons. First the contact with the soldiers "[...] was not very pleasant but convinced of its political necessity, we learned". Some soldiers were pleased to have someone to talk to, happy to find an attentive ear and to be able to tell about their daily life in the ranks of the *Wehrmacht*. Only during the second or third meeting would they begin to discuss political issues. Herta Stuberg also believes that a number of these soldiers were ready to hand them over to the Gestapo, which is how most of the activists were arrested.[109]

After the Battle of Stalingrad, when thousands of German soldiers surrendered, the Soviet authorities, with the aid of German Communists exiled in Moscow, set up the *Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland* (KDFD, National Committee of Free Germany) in an attempt to organise the anti-fascists among the POWs. Similar organisations were set up in France and Belgium, but in France the German TA activists developed a separate existence from the Austrians, while in Belgium, even though there was technically a *Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland* and an *Österreichische Freiheitsfront* (Austrian Freedom Front), in practice the work carried on as before and most activists in Belgium continued referring to themselves as *Travail Allemand*.

However, the Communists were not the only ones to attempt to undermine the German army in Belgium.

The Belgian Trotskyists

In September 1940, a heterogeneous group gathered around the Mandel family and formed a resistance organisation called *Vrank en Vrij* (Frank and Free), composed of about 100, mainly young, activists of whom 13 were Trotskyists led by Ernest Mandel.[110] Henri Mandel, Ernest's father had been far-sighted enough to buy a stencil duplicator before the German invasion and, with this, the group was able to produce, from October 1940 to August 1942, 3-4000 copies per month of *Het Vrije Woord* (Freedom of Speech) for distribution in Antwerp and its surroundings.[111] *Het Vrije Woord* did not have any particular line, concentrating on anti-Nazi propaganda, news of Allied victories and warnings of the severity of the coming persecution of the Jews.

Following increased police activity in Antwerp aimed at the Jewish population, the Mandels and other Jewish members of the group fled to Brussels where they started to

[109] Heiniger, Alix. *Engagement et identité : les militants anti-fascistes des organisations Freies Deutschland de l'exil à l'Ouest (Belgique, France, Suisse) à la RDA des années 1970 (1943-1975)*. Thèse de doctorat : Univ. Genève, 2012, pp. 62-65; Collin, Claude. "Nelly Sturm: ce qu'on appelait le « travail allemand ». (entretien avec Claude Collin)", *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, vol. 212, no. 4, 2003, pp. 42-46.

[110] This is the same Ernest Mandel who would later become one of the leaders of the international Trotskyist movement.

[111] Not to be confused with *Het Vrije Woord : Orgaan van de Antwerpsche Federatie der Vlaamsche Kommunistische Partij*

produce a German language paper of the same name, *Das Freie Wort*, aimed at the occupying forces. This contained a mixture of demoralising stories of the way in which Germany was losing the war and exhortations to act against the Hitler-regime. For instance, January 1943 issue:

> *The assurance that the Belgian resistance movement has repeatedly given you that its fight is not aimed at you, but only against the occupying forces as a representative of the accursed Hitler regime, is sincerely meant. The leaders of the Belgian resistance movement recently issued instructions to their followers not to harm any peace-loving German soldier. It is therefore your duty to reward like with like!*
>
> *Help the brave fighters of the Belgian resistance movement to escape the persecution of the Gestapo. Open the gates of the prisons for them as soon as you have the opportunity.*

Das Freie Wort was produced more or less regularly from the end of 1943 through to the liberation of Belgium. They did manage to recruit two *Wehrmacht* soldiers in Brussels, which helped greatly with the distribution of the paper.

When Ernest Mandel arrived in Brussels, he contacted Abram Wajnsztok (alias Abram Léon), a Polish immigrant of Jewish heritage who was one of the principal motivators of the Trotskyist *Parti Communiste Révolutionnaire* (PCR, Revolutionary Communist Party, previously *Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire*). The PCR had sections in Brussels and Antwerp, with its main working class bases in Charleroi and above all the Borinage, where it had over 600 members.

However, the Borinage group, mainly miners, was based around Walter Dauge. Following his arrest, first by the Belgian police in 1939 and then again by the German authorities after the invasion, Dauge dropped out of working class politics, becoming the deputy mayor of his hometown and was deeply involved in corruption and black marketeering. He was murdered in 1944, either by the *Partisans Armés* or by his old comrades from the PCR or by a rival gang of black marketeers. There was no investigation and no one missed him. Be that as it may, Dauge's defection broke the major Trotskyist base in Belgium.

The May 1941 strikes in Liège reinvigorated the PCR and, under Abram Leon's leadership, they restarted publication of *La Voie de Lénine* (Lenin's Way). The PCR concentrated its efforts on Liège and Charleoi, with Mandel taking responsibility for Liège and Leon for Charleoi.

In Liège, André Renard had expanded his base in the *Fédération des Métallurgistes de Liège* to set up the *Mouvement Syndical Unifié* (MSU, United Trade-Union Movement). While he maintained friendly relations with the PCR who printed the MSU paper, *Travail*,

the Trotskyists had little different to offer and only managed to recruit a handful of militants. However, in the Charleroi mines matters were different, an experienced Trotskyist militant, J. Davister with about 25 comrades, managed to build a movement among the coal miners of the region, leading strikes and other actions from 1942 onwards. They published a clandestine newspaper, *Le Réveil des Mineurs: Organe de la Fédération de Lutte des Mineurs de Charleroi*. By early 1944, this initiative led to the setting up the *Mouvement des Délégués* (Delegates' Movement), which was the principal trade union organisation in the Charleoi mines. However, this regional hegemony brought down the hostility of the PCB and when the *Comités de Lutte Syndicale*, the *Mouvement Syndical Unifié* merged with the old CGTB to form a single trade union federation, the rank and file of the *Mouvement des Délégués*, disgusted with the accusations of collaboration that the Communist press was levelling at Davister, walked out. The disunity disappointed many of the Carleroi miners and the *Mouvement des Délégués* went into decline and with it the remaining Trotskyist mass base in Belgium.[112]

Despite the proximity of Belgium and the Nord-Pas-de-Calais and the fact that they were both administered from Brussels, their pathways to working class resistance and the form it took were remarkably different. We shall later consider in detail the differences between the two regions, suffice to say at this stage that, despite these differences, the similarities are astounding and we see in this part of northern Europe the most complete example anywhere of a combination of the economic class struggle with anti-fascist armed resistance.

French National Insurrection

The Strikes of Spring and Summer 1944

By the beginning of 1944, it had become obvious to the workers in Northern France that the Allies would win the war sooner rather than later. On 17th January 9,800 engineering workers in the Lille area struck for between one hour and the whole day. The action, demanding a wage increase and more food, as well as bicycle tyres and shoes, continued with a short strike at *Lille-Fives* on the 18th. The struggle then cooled down with only a brief stoppage at the *Scierie Evrard* at Auxie-le-Château on 28th. Between January and June, there is only a record of a one-day strike at the *Mines de Dourges* involving 600 workers.

[112] Lorneau, Marc. "Le mouvement trotskyste belge: septembre 1939 - décembre 1964", *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, vol. 1062-1063, no. 37, 1984, pp. 1-57.
Stutje, Jan-Willem, "Ernest Mandel en résistance. Les socialistes révolutionnaires en Belgique, 1940-1945", *La Belgique sauvage*, 2011.
Ratner, Harry, "Report on the PCR", *Revolutionary History - A Paradise for Capitalism?*, 1998, pp.63-69 *Le Réveil des Mineurs*, *Travail*, *La Voie de Lénine*, *Das Freie Wort* and *Het Vrije Woord* can be found on-line at https://warpress.cegesoma.be/en/newspaper-list.

There were work stoppages in all the mining basins of France in the four months leading up to the liberation of Paris, while there were a dozen strikes on the SNCF (French Railways) from April to July 1944, leading to the big railway strike in August 1944 which caused considerable difficulties for the *Wehrmacht* as they started to retreat in the face of the Allied landings. More than 3,600 railway workers refused to work on 11 August.

The lists of demands that the strikers presented to both the Vichy authorities and the occupation authorities were mainly based around low wages and lack of food. At the same time, it was obvious to the authorities that these seemingly simple economic demands concealed anti-fascist political sentiments, but they had enough to deal with as the war turned decisively against them and did not press the point.

Where the repression did strike, workers were swift to take industrial action in their defence. When, following the accidental derailment of their train on 1 April 1944, the SS division *Hitler Jugend* massacred eighty-six civilians, including twenty-six SNCF employees, in Ascq, near Lille, a strike of railway workers in protest spread as far as Paris. On 14 April, when German soldiers killed some workers at the LTT factory at Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, 2000 stopped work. There were similar strikes in other workplaces throughout the country when faced with arrests and deportations.

The presence of German troops inside factories also provoked strikes. For example, 25 April at the Chausson plant at Meudon, the workers "crossed their arms" until the German troops, who were occupying the factory, departed. Similarly, in March, 2,215 workers at Peugeot at Sochaux took action against the presence of 100 *Waffen SS*, who had been sent by the management to "reinforce the control and surveillance following repeated sabotages".[113]

Departmental Liberation Committee

The *Comité français de Libération nationale* (CFLN, French Committee of National Liberation) was formed on 3 June 1943 and, after a period of joint leadership, on 9 November it came under the chairmanship of de Gaulle. This body considered itself to be the provisional government of Free France with, within occupied France, the *Comité National de la Résistance* (CNR, National Committee of Resistance), formed in May 1943, as a sort of proxy parliament.

At the departmental level, in part to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Anglo-US allies who were always keen to undermine the claims of the internal resistance, *Comités départementaux de la Libération*, (CDL, Departmental Liberation Committees) were established.

In the Nord, the inaugural meeting took place at the home Doctor Defaux in the rue Brûle-Maison in Lille on 6 November 1943. It started badly when the PCF delegate

[113] Avakoumovitch, Ivan, "Les grèves du printemps et de l'été", *Cahiers d'histoire*, 1988 N° 35 - La Libération de la France 2.

accused the CGT representative, a *confédéré*, of being an imposter. Nevertheless, François Closon, de Gaulle's representative, managed to restore a measure of unity when he said:

> *The Americans have got their eyes on the administration of France, which they wish to dominate. It is important therefore to bring together all the forces of the resistance on the widest basis and to immediately prepare the political organisation to put in place as soon as the enemy has departed.*[114]

Faced with the threat of US occupation, completely credible after the Darlan affair[115] in Algeria, the CDL du Nord was set up.

Le Patriote du Pas-de-Calais wrote:

> *The organisations of the resistance in the department of Nord have recently given us a good example of unity in action; we hope that the different groups in the Pas-de-Calais will, in turn, confront the invader with a departmental resistance committee.*

A wish that was quickly realised and the *CDL du Pas-de-Calais* was formed in Lens at the end of November.

Aerial Bombardment and Parachute Drops

During the first half of 1944, there was a lot of activity by the Allied air-forces in the skies of the Forbidden Zone, daily raids against industry, infrastructure and communications, particularly the railways.

Allied carpet bombing caused serious material damage and hundreds of civilian casualties. The FTP, using the communication channels of the local branch of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), code-named *Sylvestre-WO*, had requested that the Allies send in parachute drops of arms and explosives, arguing that they were much better placed to destroy the objectives of the bombardments without heavy civilian casualties.

However, avoiding "collateral damage" costing the lives of foreigners has never been one of the priorities of the RAF and the USAF. It has been estimated that aerial bombardment cost the lives of 50,000 French civilians while, in just two raids on the town of St Omer on 13 May 1943 and 25 June 1944, 155 people were killed and 151 injured with 489 houses destroyed.[116]

Even though the FTP was by far the most important resistance movement in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, they did not receive any parachute drops of arms or explosives from the Allies who favoured the Gaullist *Organisation Civile et Militaire* (OCM, Civil and Military Organisation). Despite its origins in the senior civil service and high-ranking military officers, the OCM had developed good relations with the Communist resistance in

[114] Dejonghe et Daniel, *Libération du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais*,Hachette, Paris, 1974, p.71.
[115] See section "Wind of Change" above.
[116] Dufay Raymond, *La Vie dans l'Audomarois sous l'Occupation*, SMADA, St Omer, 1990, pp.293-316 & 425-429.

the Nord-Pas-de-Calais as they shared a belief in the need for immediate armed action and sabotage.

Roger Pannequin again:

> *The FTP and the OCM considered themselves to be the only active movements, while in their eyes, Libération-Nord et la Voix du Nord were too passive*.[117]

The OCM shared one or two parachute drops with the FTP, but London did not send them very much and they did not really have enough for their own use. The Allies' policy in the supply of armaments to the resistance was to ensure that no group on the ground would have the military means to play a political role that might contradict the overall plans of London or Washington. Thus, the FTP had the active militants, but did not have sufficient equipment for them to be effective so, during this period, half the actions of the FTP were related to the theft of arms and explosives.

Some Statistics

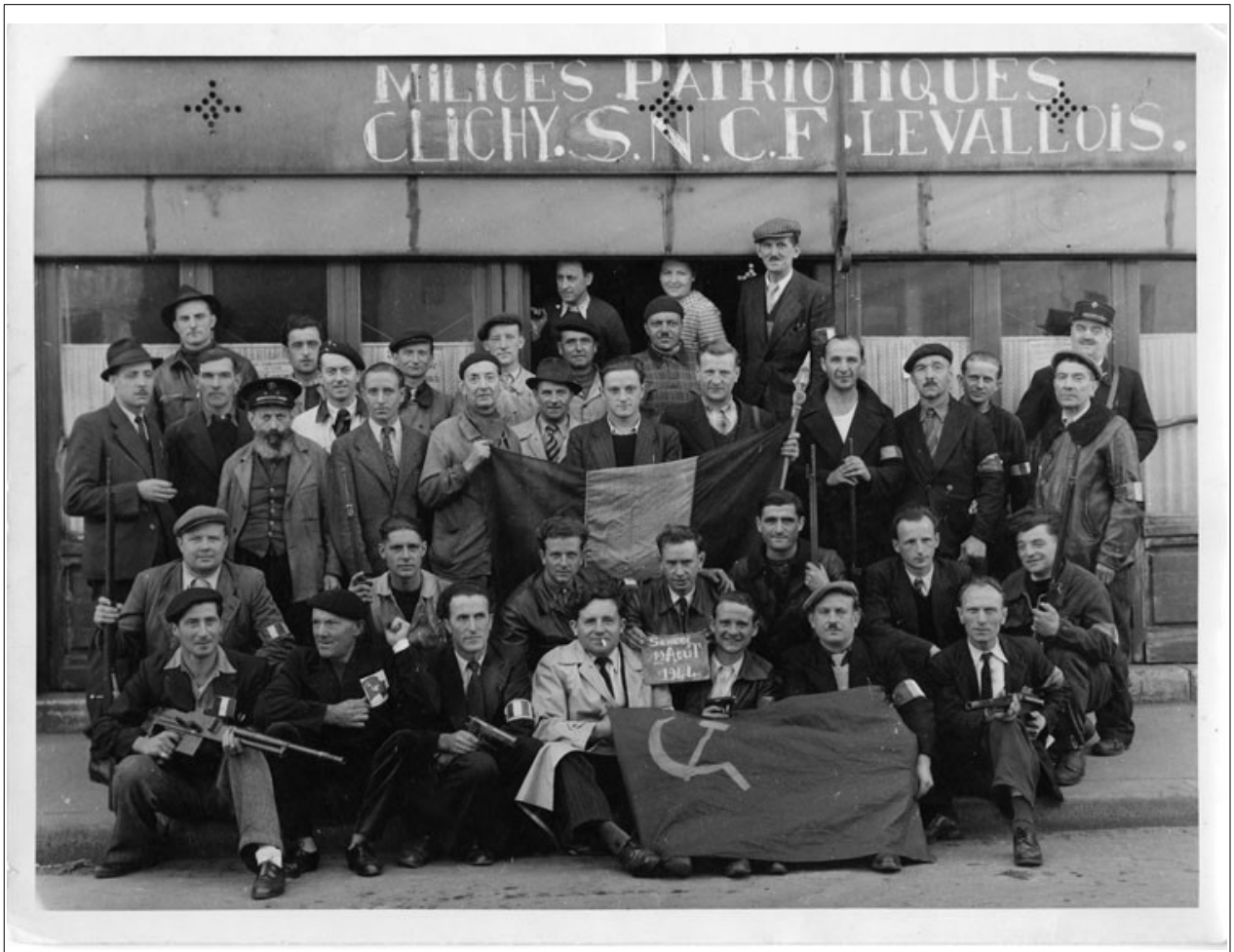
At the beginning of 1944, the resistance, which up to then had only commanded minority support, started to become a mass movement. In March 1944, the PCF had 2500 members in the Nord and 2,000 in the Pas-de-Calais, with another thousand Young Communists. The FN had 10,000 members and there were 120 FTP units, each of 3 to 5 members. among the miners, the *Comités d'Unité Syndicale et d'Action* had 4500 active militants in the Pas-de-Calais and 3500 in the Nord, while the illegal metalworkers' trade union had 6000 members. As the CGT started to reform, the Communist-led *unitaire* faction was completely dominant.

There was an active clandestine Communist press in the region with, in addition to the department-wide papers, *l'Enchaîné* and *l'Avant-garde*, there were numerous local issues, for example *L'Espoir* in Carvin. The *Front National* published *le Patriote du Nord-Pas-de-Calais* and *la Pensée française*. The clandestine union organisations published papers for the different industries: *la Voix du Mineur*, *le Rail*, *le Métallo*, *le Travailleur Textile* and so on.[118]

[117] Estager, *Ami entends-tu,* p.230.
[118] Estager, *Ami entends-tu,* p.246.

Milices Patriotiques and the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur

The creation of *Comités Départementaux de la Libération* was intended to also unite the armed organisations of the resistance in a new organisation, the *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur* (FFI, French Forces of the Interior), which would be commanded by a Gaullist career officer, General Marie-Pierre Kœnig. However, the mutual hostility and distrust between the FTP and most of the other resistance movements in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais meant that the integration of the FTP into the FFI was purely formal. Thus, when a local FFI HQ was established at the Abbey of Maretz, the FTP announced that they would integrate their planning into the structure of the FFI, but would retain their autonomy. Meanwhile, the Gaullists were keen to use the FFI as a means of limiting the political and military role of the Communists.



Milices Patriotiques in the Clichy railway depot

The *Milices Patriotiques* (Patriotic Militias) originated in a French Communist Party initiative in 1943, intended as a means of integrating the expected new recruits when the anticipated *Insurrection Nationale* (National Insurrection) occurred. The National Council of the Resistance charged the *Comités de Libération* with creating militia groups to work

in liaison with the FFI in order to preserve public order and support the Liberation Committees. Recognising the fact that, until the liberation, the armed militants of the FTP would necessarily be a small minority, these *Milices Patriotiques* would form a useful auxiliary. Recruited on the basis of neighbourhoods, villages and workplaces, they were intended to protect the civilian population against reprisals and atrocities as the German army retreated. However, given that the FTP was badly armed, there was nothing left for these auxiliaries. The *Comité Départemental du FN du Pas-de-Calais* issued a leaflet giving advice as to how to proceed:

> *How to get arms? There are surely still patriots who have a revolver or a hunting rifle. Even a dagger, a blackjack, an axe or a hammer, while obviously being rudimentary weapons, when they are in brave hands, enable you to get machine guns or revolvers from isolated boches or to surprise one of Darnand's militiame*n.[119]

The same leaflet continued:

> *Certain resistance groups are in possession of clandestine arms depots that they refuse to distribute. We demand that these weapons be shared out and denounce the heavy responsibility that lies on the heads of those who do not furnish the patriots with all necessary means to achieve the liberation of the nation*.

The "Grève Insurrectionnelle" in the Paris Region

The Paris general strike was to be the decisive element in the national insurrection, with a double objective. Firstly, to paralyse those parts of the economy that the occupying forces considered essential, the railways, the post and the engineering industry and secondly to free the workers for the armed conflict with the occupying forces, based on the workplace based *Milices Patriotiques*.

There were a number of patriotic demonstrations in Paris and its suburbs on 14 July 1944. At Vitry, in response to a call from the CGT, 600 workers from the SNCF workshop walked out. Carrying a French national flag, the railway workers of Masséna and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges joined them in an assembly of 3,000 workers beside the statue of Rouget de l'Isle at Choisy-le-Roy. German troops opened fire on the march and several demonstrators were wounded and many were arrested. In the next few days, strikes and other industrial action swept through the railway depots in the Paris region: Noisy-le-Sec, les Batignolles, Montrouge, Juvisy, Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, Chelles, La Chapelle.. Then, on 10 August, the insurrection began. The movement spread to engineering and public transport and by the 19th, the working class of Paris had largely paralysed the

[119] "Conseils pratiques aux Patriotes" - Les archives du Musée municipal de Harnes.

capital and were effectively in control when the Free French tanks arrived, many of which were crewed by Spanish republican refugees.[120]

Liberation

When the Normandy landings took place, the Nord-Pas-de-Calais reacted speedily, but not always with a happy outcome and there was one more tragedy awaiting the FTP in the region. On 8 June, two days after D Day, 350 FTP militants from the mining basin were instructed to link up with the *Maquis* in the Ardennes, 150 km to the south. German troops attacked them leaving 34 dead in combat, 68 shot after capture and 86 who died in the camps. The survivors were only able to get back home with the loss of all their weapons.[121] Despite exhaustive enquiries, the originator of this instruction, which was contrary to all the established FTP procedures, was never discovered. Other responses to the Normandy landings were much more efficient. Between 6 June and 4 September, the FTP participated in 3000 attacks and the railway workers put 120 locomotives out of service.[122]

When the news of the Normandy landings reached the Sambre basin on 8 June, the factories stopped work one after another but, when they realised that they were alone, the clandestine trade union leadership quickly issued a list of economic demands and returned to work after 3 or 4 days. On 28 June, 4,500 metalworkers in six factories struck for the day in the Sambre Basin, with many other workers taking some other form of action; in all 25% of the region's workforce participated. On 13 July, there was one strike of four days at the *Société de Matériel de Chemin de Fer Franco-Belge*, which involved over 1000 workers. There are also reports of a three day strike at Montceau-les-Mines. On 14 July, there were widespread demonstrations, while on 21 August, the *Comité Départemental de la Libération* called for a day of protest action and the miners went on strike the following day. The workers at the *Centrale Électrique de Choques* joined the movement the next day. On the 23rd and 24th, the strikers at Marles les Mines mounted a picket line armed with machine guns, revolvers and hand grenades. On the 25th, in Bethune, the whole engineering sector along with the chemical and footwear industries and the *Sartiaux* factory in Hénin-Liétard stopped work. By the 27th the strike had spread from Bruay to the Belgian frontier, continuing in some of the more militant mines and factories until 1 September when the Allied troops started to arrive.[123]

Faced with this insurrectional general strike, the Gaullists in the FFI circulated a leaflet saying:

[120] Willard, Germaine, "Le rôle des masses populaires dans la libération", *Cahiers d'histoire*, 1974 #8/9 pp.48-59.
[121] Interview with Monsieur Louis Poive, *ancien combattant* FTP.
[122] Estager, *Ami entends-tu*, p. 251.
[123] Taylor, *Between Resistance and Collaboration*, p.89-90.

Beware of rushing into action, this strike was not called by the FFI! Await the orders of General Kœnig.[124]

An appeal that was largely ignored and the collaborationist mayors abandoned their posts while the Police and Gendarmerie at long last changed sides and supported the resistance. So, by the time the Allied tanks rolled into the Pas-de-Calais on 1 September, the region, with the exception of Dunkirk was already in the hands of the resistance.

End of the Occupation in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais

The overwhelming majority of the fighting by resistance forces in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais after the Normandy landings was done by the FTP and the OCM. The organisations *Libération-Nord* and *Voix du Nord*, despite being much better armed, had not had the day to day experience that would have enabled them to use their weapons effectively. It is likely that they never had the intention to fight the German forces, rather that they were set up to enable the Gaullists and the SFIO to jockey for position after the war. They allied themselves with those ex-vichyists, who had changed sides at the last minute, the late-flowering "March Violets". Meanwhile the most militant activists in the FFI were integrated into the new national army and sent off to continue the fight on the other side of the Rhine, leaving the Gaullist/SFIO coalition to seize the political initiative in the region.

Charles Tillon, a member of the PCF central committee and leader of the FTP, later wrote:

Our strategy was to make sure that no single party could use the insurrection for their own advantage..[125]

Their political opponents were clearly not as scrupulous.

Belgium and Northern France, Why the difference?

Before considering the differences, we should note the striking similarity between the *Comités de Lutte Syndicale*, the *Mouvement Syndical Unifié* and the *Fédération de Lutte des Mineurs de Charleroi* in Belgium and the *Comités d'Unité Syndicale et d'Action* in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Based on workplace committees, prepared to take militant initiatives as well as implementing national campaigns, they all issued large numbers of factory bulletins linking the fight for better conditions with opposition to the occupation. There the similarity between the two regions ends, despite the Communist party being the leading organisation in working class resistance in both regions.

There were no active Trotskyists in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais and thus no papers like *Das Freie Wort*. There were similar initiatives in France based on the newspaper *Arbeiter und Soldat* (Worker and Soldier), but they took place in Brittany and Paris. Equally there

[124] Dejonghe et Laurent, *Liberation du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais*, p.106.
[125] Tillon, *On Chantait Rouge*, p.370.

were very few German speaking refugees in Northern France, so the activities of *Travail Allemand* were not practical in the region and thus there was less argument against the assassination of individual German soldiers and there was no one like Todor Angelov in the leadership of the FTP arguing against such individual attacks. In any case, in Belgium, the large extreme right wing, collaborationist organisations *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (VNV, Flemish National Union) and Rex provided the *Partisans Armés* with more than enough targets.

While there are superficial similarities between the *Belgian Front de l'Indépendance* and the French *Front National*, the Belgian organisation was much more involved in providing an infrastructure for the resistance and was less of a propaganda exercise. While both professed to be patriotic, there was considerable difference between the nationalisms of the two countries. French nationalism had its republican origins in the French Revolution and had managed to convince whole swathes of the population that it was progressive. Compare this to Belgium, which was divided linguistically, so regionalism was a popular counterbalance to nationalism, and politically it was a kingdom in which the King himself was not particularly popular. Similarly, French imperialism, with its talk of a *mission civilisatrice* (civilising mission), held far more sway over the popular imagination than the Belgian colony of the Congo, widely seen as a corrupt, personal, get-rich-quick project of the King. Finally, Belgium had a long history of attempted neutrality in war, so military defeat was not the same blow to national pride. While the workers in both Belgium and Northern France showed enormous courage and determination in pursuing their industrial action during the occupation, there were considerably more economic strikes in Belgium, but in the immediate lead up to the arrival of the Allied armies, the Nord-Pas-de-Calais showed much greater patriotic militancy.

But probably most significantly, despite both being affiliated to the Communist International, the Communist parties had their origins in splits in the socialist parties of both countries and their whole history had been one of orienting their intervention to their respective national political arenas. Cross border links were confined to leadership level and there were no real rank and file connections. International solidarity was important at the level of propaganda, but it was not the stuff of day to day militant activity.

However, there was one organisation in the region that did treat international, cross border organisation seriously, the International Transport Workers' Federation operating from the Belgian port of Antwerp.

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

By Merilyn Moos

With a few honourable exceptions, neither the trade union bureaucracies nor leadership of the social democratic parties of Europe played any significant role in the resistance to the growth and spread of fascism in the 1930s and 1940s. Committed to legal parliamentary politics and negotiated settlements of industrial disputes, the majority either failed to confront the Nazis or sought refuge abroad, where they spent most of their efforts planning how to achieve power and manage capitalism after an Allied victory. The major exception to this pattern was the International Transport Workers' Federation led by Edo Fimmen.

These were left social democrats who defied convention by organising illegal underground resistance groups among German seafarers, dockers and railway workers as well as bringing aid and solidarity to the republican forces during the Spanish civil war. Of particular importance were their operations in the port of Antwerp in Belgium.

The International Transport Workers' Federation had its origins in the industrial unrest in the ports of northern Europe towards the end of the 19th century when port employers and shipowners set out to break a series of dockers' and seamen's strikes. Havelock Wilson of the British-based National Seafarers' and Firemen's Union (NSFU) initially founded the federation in London in 1896, in support of striking dockers in Rotterdam and Hamburg. His success inspired Tom Mann and Ben Tillett of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labourers' Union (DWRGLU), the leaders of the 1889 London Dock Strike, to take part in the movement. In 1904, its headquarters moved to Germany. As early as 1911, the federation and its affiliated transport unions across western Europe paralysed numerous European ports simultaneously. By 1912, the ITF had 700,000 affiliated members. In 1919, under the leadership of Edo Fimmen, its general secretary and guiding light, it moved to Amsterdam, and in 1939, to the UK where it still is.[126]

In the inter-war years, its membership was around two million. At this time, the ITF had strong links with the German Union of Railway Workers and operated alongside the Association of Seafarers, Dockers and Inland waterway workers (*Einheitsverband der Seeleute, Hafenarbeiter und Binnenschiffer,* EVSHB), which was founded in 1930 as part of the Communist Party's Third Period Red Unionism.[127]

In the first half of 1923, Edo Fimmen had secretly contacted the Russian trade unions through the Comintern. This resulted in a joint conference between the Russian trade unions and the ITF on 23/24 May 1923 in Berlin, where Fimmen met Karl Radek, calling

[126] Nelles, Dieter, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität Die Internationale Transportarbeiter-Föderation (ITF) im Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, Essen, 2001.
[127] https://www.itfglobal.org/en/reports-publications/history-first-100-years-itf.

for unity of all transport workers. The move came to nothing and Fimmen's attempt to draw in the Red Unions which had been set up by the Comintern as rivals to the orthodox unions, failed and divided the membership.

Edo Fimmen regarded the ITF's duties as providing information to help members and member organisations in the struggle over working and living conditions to the highest international standards, supporting international social legislation, and fostering the international rights of trade unions. The ITF's non-sectarian line meant that they worked with both the KPD, (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands,* Communist Party of Germany) and the SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, Social Democratic Party of Germany) as well as members of smaller revolutionary groups, but insisted that their members agree to the ITF's objectives.

Edo Fimmen

In passing, it appears that Fimmen had a profound contempt for the leaders of the German trade unions and the SPD's exile organisation, SOPADE, who had fled after the Nazi takeover. He saw them as morally bankrupt for their failure to carry out anti-Nazi work in Germany and he refused to work with them. However, ordinary SPD members who wished to carry on the struggle found a political home in ITF.

Here, we shall focus on working class resistance to fascism under the umbrella of the ITF either based in or originating from Antwerp. It is divided into: ITF, their work in Antwerp and their anti-Nazi agitation among German anti-Nazis, its relationship to members of EVSHB and to the train workers and finally, its role in the Spanish Civil war. I am aware that this article barely mentions the role of women but neither do the available sources, largely because ITF and associated unions were based predominantly in trades dominated by male workers.

The ITF and Anti-Nazi Trade Unionism

From 1933 to 1945, the ITF played a key role in supporting different forms of transport workers' anti-fascist struggles, often against the wishes of the traditionalist, national trade unions. Here we have rare phenomena: Edo Fimmen, a trade union bureaucrat, who was broadly sympathetic to a social democratic perspective, campaigning on bread and butter issues but, from early on, prioritising the organisation of resistance to the Nazi regime, including its suppression of unions.

Fimmen, though Dutch, had parents of German origin. In 1905, he was one of the founder members of the General Confederation of Netherlands Trade and Office Employees, which successfully campaigned for equal pay for men and women in 1909. From 1919 till his death in 1942, he was the General Secretary of the ITF.

As Fenner Brockway, the Political Secretary of the British Independent Labour Party (ILP), wrote in his obituary in the November/December 1942 issue of the ITF journal:

There is no-one whose actual assistance has been greater to the heroic groups preparing for the day of Socialist Revolution in the countries of Europe... We must remember too his valuable contribution to socialist thought and organisation.

Fimmen was most unusual among trade union leaders in his steadfast and organised resistance to the Nazis, but the ITF had to struggle to get its anti-fascism position heard officially. Theodor Liepart, the General Secretary of the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* (ADGB, General German Trades Union Federation) did not take an anti-Nazi position seriously. On February 19, 1933, Leipart rejected the ITF's proposal, which was supported by the French trade-union leader, Leon Jouhaux, for an international boycott of Germany, saying that the fight against Hitler was an internal German affair. Indeed, Nelles describes the ADGB's call to participate in the Nazis' travesty of a May Day demonstration in 1933 as "a symbol of bloodless surrender before the Nazi rulers" which did as much damage as the Nazis' subsequent outlawing of the unions. In August 1933, Fimmen wrote of this decision: "This terrible defeat of the most powerful labour organisations in Europe was the consequence of years of trade union bourgeois leaders and incompetent Communists".[128]

Based in Amsterdam, the ITF set itself the task of contacting and setting up illegal undercover anti-Nazi trade union networks, including the distribution of anti-fascist leaflets and newsletters. According to statements made by Fimmen to Willi Münzenberg, at the time a leading propagandist for the KPD and the Comintern but later disenchanted with the USSR, their aim was to organise rank and file trade-unionists and to develop a network of shop stewards who they would keep informed of developments and demands. Political affiliation was never queried, though apparently Fimmen preferred the non-aligned; what mattered was work for the anti-Nazi united front. To help keep their members safe, from early on, they functioned without permanent branches, treasurers, membership cards, subscriptions, files or paid officials. The dangers were immense.

From 1933 till 1945, the ITF published the fortnightly *Hakenkreuz über Deutschland* (Swastika over Germany), later renamed *Faschismus*. To give an idea of its reach, 1870 copies were distributed in May 1935, and 2635 illegal brochures and newspapers in October 1935. At least 60% of the designated illegal literature seemed to reach Germany. Almost all Rhine river ports and most seaports were supplied directly or indirectly. Dutch inland waterway skippers and crews, part of the ITF's extensive clandestine network, smuggled the publications into Germany, where it became one of the main sources of

[128] Nelles, Dieter, *The Repressed Resistance. The Memory of the Resistance of the International Transport Workers' Federation in the German Trade Unions.*

information.[129] The ITF also provided technical assistance in printing the illegal *Miners' Newspaper*.

Seafarers and the Antwerp Group

The Antwerp Group of the International Transport Workers' Federation was one of the only breakaways from the International of Seafarers and Harbour Workers (ISH), which was affiliated to the Moscow-based Red International of Labour Unions' (RILU or Profintern) as part of the "Red Union" strategy adopted by the Comintern in 1928. The German section of ISH, the *Einheitsverband der Seeleute, Hafenarbeiter und Binnenschiffer* (Union of Seafarers, Harbour Workers and Barge Workers) was established in Hamburg in 1931 and soon came under the leadership of the KPD official Ernst Wollweber, who would later become head of the Stasi. The ISH had to move their main office to Copenhagen in 1933 and subsequently to Paris, which severely limited them. As the Soviet leadership became increasingly nationalist and bureaucratic and soft on the Nazi system, they opposed the attempts by the ISH to build an anti-Nazi underground network. Sailors who rejected the dogmatic and bureaucratic working methods of the ISH began organising with ITF.[130]

Fimmen also opposed the KPD tactic, known as the "Trojan Horse", advocating work in the DAF, (*Deutsche Arbeitsfront*, German Labour Front) the only legal labour organisation during the Nazi regime, which replaced the various independent trade unions in Germany.

The ITF built up an illegal network among seafarers on the Baltic and North Sea coasts, in particular, though not exclusively, in Antwerp. Because so many German ships docked in Antwerp, it became a crucial organising centre. From the mid-1930s till the outbreak of World War II, the ITF campaigned among German merchant seamen against the Nazi government.

Key to the approach of the Antwerp Group was "Cohesion among seafarers" based above all on acquaintance "with the activity of individual comrades". The shop stewards had to be in continuous contact with the crews of the German ships, so that they were known. Collecting dues can encourage this. The shop stewards exploited every conflict on board over, for example, better living conditions, with a view to the ultimate overthrowing of the Nazi regime. However, there was a problem with comrades who 'turned' and became Gestapo informers.

Edo Fimmen, the secretary of the ITF, developed a close relationship with the Antwerp dockers and merchant seamen, organising cells of supporters and couriers on German ships, encouraging informal resistance, circulating illicit publications for

[129] Lewis, Harold, *The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) 1945-1965: an Organizational and Political Anatomy*, PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2003.
[130] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, p.45.

distribution, planning sabotage and saving German refugees. Maritime unions have always been used by the left as a means of getting into countries which wanted them kept out or to get out of countries which wanted to keep them in. Countering Nazi propaganda among German sailors and dockworkers was crucial. Papers and bulletins were secreted onto ships, then had to be hidden on the docks of German port cities, where they could be found by local activists.

Between 1935 and 1939, they had contacts with crews on more than 600 ships and shop stewards on a total of 322 ships, an impressive number of militants, even if a minority. Between May and December 1935 alone, ITF shop stewards visited an average of 300 sea and Rhine ships in the port of Antwerp.[131]

ITF grew stronger as the influence of the KPD grew weaker. The KPD had been key in organising the seafarers and bargemen, laying the ground work for the ITF's later successes.[132] But there was a fundamental disagreement and many ISH members broke with the KPD in 1935 because of the poor supply of illegal literature and their feeling that the ISH Central Committee did not take their work into account, consult with them or provide support.[133] Many were also in dispute with the KPD-led organisation because of their criticism of Third Period politics and accused the KPD of underestimating the Nazi assault on the labour movement and its dangerous retention of formal organisational structures, such as membership cards, dues stamps and the like.[134] This formalism, they argued, enabled the Gestapo to crush many illegal groups, including among the seamen, Rhine boatmen and dockers who had a "disproportionately large number of casualties of dead, battered and imprisoned people".[135]

On January 7, 1936, the "*Gruppe Deutscher Seeleute Antwerpen*" wrote a letter to Fimmen.

> *We are a group of German sailors...Our group consists of members of the KPD... For about 9 months our group has been mutinying... against an incomprehensible policy of the ISH, as well as the Party...For example, it is not right for us or any party member...to have to incomprehensibly idolize the leader...We are doing revolutionary work... We have liaison officers or groups on about 190 German seagoing ships... 85-90% are anti-fascist and sympathize with us.*
>
> They end by saying that they hope that working with the ITF will be fruitful.[136]

[131] Nelles, *Widerstand und Internationale Solidarität*, pp.79,156.
[132] Hyslop, Jonathan, "German Seafarers, Anti-Fascism and the Anti-Stalinist Left: The 'Antwerp Group' and Edo Fimmen's International Transportworkers Federation, 1933-1940", *Global Networks* August 2018, 19(4) p.5.
[133] Jones, Mike, "Letter - Jan Valtin Again", *Revolutionary History*, 1995, Vol. 5 No. 4.
Nelles, *Widerstand und Internationale Solidarität*, pp.156-7.
[134] Jones, *Jan Valtin Again.*
[135] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität, p.*65.
[136] Ibid., pp.148-9.

Willi Eichler, head of the (*Internationaler Socialistischer Kampfbund* ISK, International Socialist Combat League) confirming the ISH members' disillusionment, wrote in a report to Edo Fimmen in March 1936:

> *A number of seafarers and inland boatmen who had previously worked under the leadership of the so-called Red International have disgustedly turned away from their practices and readily submitted to the ITF ...They are honest proletarians and through them we have good connections today on 96 German seagoing vessels and over 100 Rhine barges and tugboats.*[137]

Willi Eichler joined the SPD in 1923, but left to become a member and then chairperson of the ISK, many of whose members had also been expelled from the SPD. They were a small, strongly anti-Nazi and pro-united front cadre organisation. Their adoption of underground conspiratorial methods early on helped them survive. In 1933, the ISK attempted to build an underground trade-union, *Unabhängige Sozialistische Gewerkschaft* (Independent Socialist Union), which campaigned early on for a united front. It supported the ITF which distributed their illegal material in Germany.

From 1932, Eichler was editor of the ISK's anti-Nazi newspaper, *Der Funke*. He fled Germany in 1933 for France and finally the UK.

Willi Eichler

The KPD subsequently tried to establish cells on the ships but failed. (Ironically, they did this in collaboration with the SPD.) This paved the way for Communist seamen and the majority of former Communist shop stewards joining ITF. The Antwerp group stated that membership had to be discussed with them and members' loyalty had to be first and foremost to the ITF. The KPD instructed its members to work in the ITF and the KPD line had by late 1936 shifted towards the Popular Front.

The ITF comrades regularly boarded the German ships in the Antwerp docks to discuss working conditions, food and the relationship with superiors and, if trust was established, about conditions in Germany in an attempt to win over the crews to an anti-Nazi position. They also distributed literature on board. In the evening, ITF activists visited port pubs frequented by German seafarers, a couple of which were owned by sympathetic Germans, where they chatted to the seafarers and distributed literature. Two shop stewards from each ship were invited to ITF committee meetings. The organisational

[137] Gottwaldt, Alfred Bernd, *Railway workers against Hitler. Resistance and persecution on the Reichsbahn 1933-1945*.Wiesbaden: Marix-Verlag, 2009, p.86.

model of the ITF group was modelled on the revolutionary groups among German sailors in 1918.

The ITF appears to have been remarkably successful. Though it is impossible to be precise about the figures, it appears that there were union groups with a total of 128 members on 22 German ships. Some 300 to 400 German seafarers were sympathetic to the ITF or their shop stewards, many ex-KPD. There were 78 German ships with shop stewards in January 1936 and 221 in 1937. The Antwerp group systematically expanded its contacts with German seafarers and in 1939, when most of the illegal groups in Germany had already been broken up by the Gestapo, had around 300 shop stewards on German seagoing vessels and others under inland navigation as well as connection to two groups of port workers in Hamburg which had up to 80 members.[138] But one must beware: Nelles suggests that this increase in contacts is not correlated with increased but decreased anti-Nazi activity.[139]

In February 1936, 18 ships took illegal publications to Germany; in March 1936 "literature in small packages or many single copies to Bremen, Hamburg, Stettin, Danzig, Lübeck, Bremerhaven and some Rhine ports". In 1937, 1,300 copies of 3 issues were published, 800 of which were circulated via Antwerp, 200 via Rotterdam, and the rest via ports in the USA, Denmark and Norway. [140]

The following bulletin is remarkable for being written by the Antwerp group itself in alliance with German seamen. It explains why they support ITF and its fight against the Nazis and was reprinted in the ITF bulletin of March 1936.

Our connection to the ITF

Because of the disunity of the German working class and the indecisiveness of the leaders, the accursed fascism is winning in Germany and the union organisations are being smashed. After three years of almost unbearable suffering, unprecedented in the history of the international labour movement, it is now clear that only a united German labour force, under a unified leadership, in unified organisations and supported by the international organisations of the world proletariat, can bring about the defeat of the most brutal, worker-attacking fascist dictatorship.

As a result, only the unions of the free trades, i.e. seamen, boat workers and sailors, as well as all workers in the transport industry, can lead and guide the way to the ITF with its global organisation.

From this realisation, the anti-fascist organisations are working to construct the unity of the working class on the basis of union unification. We urge all those

[138] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, pp.79,156.
[139] *Ibid*., p.175.
[140] *Ibid*., pp.12 & 186.

employed in maritime and inland navigation to support us in our struggles and to use its full force within the ITF in the fight for the liberation of the German labour force.

For this reason, the Antwerp group, in agreement with its representatives on the German ship, seeks your agreement to help re-establish the free trade unions and to join their full strength with ITF in the fight for the liberation of the German labour force.

We urge all those employed in the maritime and inland navigation to support us in our struggles

One for All. All for One.

Down with the brown dictatorship, Never with the DAF, the organisation which will lead us to our ruin. Long live our association with the ITF.

The following unsigned passage from the same bulletin, highlights the continuing concern of the ITF for the working conditions of its members but it is crucially set against both the dynamic of Italian fascism and the profit motive behind Nazism and the oil bosses. It is unclear how far their raising the issue of sanctions on petrol and gas to bring an end to the Italian fascists' occupation of Abyssinia is propaganda or had some reality. It also brings out the importance of Antwerp as a port.

Deutsches SS Fortune nach Mogadischu

Although it is certain that the war of conquest by Italian fascism in Abyssinia can be stopped quickly by extending the sanctions on petroleum and gasoline, the national powers in question do not yet want to impose the petroleum embargo on Italy. The profit motive of the petroleum and petrol suppliers have prohibited an agreement on the issue.

Just in the very recent past, large deals in Italy with Mexico, North America and the Black Sea countries that demand petroleum have been reported. These deals are mostly additional to normal deliveries, so that Italy is able to make large oil reservations both in Italy itself and in the African colonies. Apart from the better-than-expected tanker tonnage, there has recently been a switch to chartering regular freight tonnage for the transport of petrol to Mogadishu and Massau in Italian Somaliland.

Some of these steamers have already left the Black Sea or North Sea ports with such loads of barrels. In the course of time, about 6000000 barrels of fuel are expected. The ships are probably all making the journey around Africa. In Antwerp, the German steamer Fortuna has taken such a load in the last month. It was an old steamer, whose only safety device against the danger of fire and explosions is that men have been banned from smoking on the deck. Of the thousands of barrels of petrol, there are always a few leaks. In bad weather, even if they are well stowed,

leaks always occur with these barrels. Gas formation was already present when loading in Antwerp. By the time the ship is out of the bad weather zone, a number of other barrels are leaking. The lucky name 'Fortuna' of this old shambling prince is not an insurance for the sailors on board, victims of the closely related profits of the petrol kings and the war of Italian fascism in East Africa. The large barrel loads of petrol, which threaten the life and safety of the crews like dynamite charges, shows once again that it is necessary to ban all such activity in the future.

In addition, an important tool of the Antwerp Group's activities from 1935-1938 was a stencil-machined bulletin, *Die Schiffahrt* (Shipping) which specifically targeted German sailors, a few of whom contributed. The fourth edition, in February 1936, announced its unification with the ITF. Fimmen wrote:

The help, the cooperation of every honest person, no matter where, is of great importance. There is only one condition. The work is done within the framework of the ITF because it bears full responsibility for this work. Full, mutual trust and cooperation is essential for the comrades...

I have this trust in the members of the group in Antwerp. To the German sailors who are without organisation today, I call: Unite with the ITF. In Antwerp the ITF is looking for and maintains the connection with the group of German sailors, who, for many months, under great difficulties, have bravely battled and who will continue to do so in the future as the only group recognised and supported by the ITF.

The bulletin of the Antwerp Group of German Seamen gave a voice to the sailors themselves. It opted for an optimist tone. For example, in early 1937, a sailor reassured its readers that, on a voyage out of Hamburg, "among about 40 deck and engine-room crew, from the first day a completely anti-fascist spirit prevailed". Although there were 3 or 4 Nazis on board, the crew refused to give the Nazi salute.[141]

Again, from June 1937, *Die Schiffahrt* put out a militant anti-Nazi statement:

The Nazi German state wants war: therefore prepare for it. Germany wants dominance in the world. Germany wants colonies and raw materials… The coming war of Nazi Germany must lead to the collapse of the Brown [SA] system. To help this collapse is your task! Prepare yourself to fulfil it.[142]

The tone is one of exhortation, not agitation. There were few if any strikes on German ships.[143] In 1938, a sailor, writing in *Die Schiffahrt*, first reassures that members of the SA or NSDAP have little influence on board. Then a call for resistance:

We have just one duty to those who have been murdered, beheaded by hatchets and tortured in the Gestapo hell-holes: Fight fascism until it collapses! For peace,

[141] Hyslop, *German Seafarers, Anti-Fascism and the Anti-Stalinist Left* , p.10.
[142] Quoted in Hyslop, p.1.
[143] Jones, *Jan Valtin Again.*

justice and freedom! Down with war! Against Hitler and his murder system! For a genuinely free and socialist Germany![144]

Antwerp also was home to a number of anti-Nazi German refugees, including some seamen. Finnen and the ITF supported, including financially, an organised group of six to eight German refugee ITF seamen in the town between the mid-1930s and 1939, some of whom were threatened with arrest and deportation.

The Belgian Political Police saw its job as stopping Communists. The category of "political refugee" was not officially recognised. A police report stated:

The city of Antwerp... has increasingly become a rallying point for Jewish and political emigration and a centre of Marxist propaganda for Western Europe... The constant presence of so many German sailors makes it easier for Marxists to propagandise against Germany...The agitation is carried out exclusively by German Social Democrats, Communists and Jews... They enjoy the complete protection of the Lord Mayor [Huysmans], *who rejects any intervention against these elements... A number of German emigrants, who misused Antwerp hospitality, engaged in uninhibited propaganda against the Reich and received an expulsion order for the end of August. The objection of* [Mayor] *Huysmans and other Social Democratic members of parliament reversed this measure*.[145]

Long before German occupation, the port of Antwerp and German ships in the harbour were taken over by the police. The German Consul General, in a "private capacity", accompanied by four officers of the Belgian judicial police and two officers of the municipal police visited German ships.

Six members of the Antwerp ITF group fled to Spain in late September 1936, including Kurt and Werner Lehmann.

Werner Lehmann, a member of the KPD and the Red Navy section of the Red Front, fled to Antwerp in April 1933 and then went to sea on German ships. He deserted in 1935 and joined the active ITF group of half a dozen German sailors in Antwerp, of which his brother Kurt was leader. The group was financed through voluntary contributions from the ITF shop stewards. Lehmann also arranged the smuggling of stowaways, who were transported for free if they were politically persecuted. He left the KPD in 1936.

In September 1936, Werner Lehmann went to Spain with six other seamen, including his brother Kurt, and fought in the international group of the Durruti column in Spain until January, after first joining the Communist-led UGT, where he was a shop steward but left after falling out with the Communist leader Beimler.

[144] *Die Schiffahrt 178/9.*

[145] Nelles's source here appears to be Prof H. Balthazar, though this is unclear.

Werner Lehmann became ill and returned to Antwerp. Under increasing pressure from the German Government to hand over politically active refugees, the Belgian government expelled Werner and Kurt Lehmann in 1938, though the Belgian transport union and Camille Huysmans, social democratic Mayor of Antwerp and President of the Parliament, had previously intervened and gained the brothers, among others, provisional residence permits.

The ITF then secured them places on the British freighter Lucerie, which sailed for Hong Kong. But they were not allowed to stay there, then were banned from disembarking in London by the police, and went back to Belgium where they were arrested. After the ITF intervened, they were released with the condition that they leave Belgium forever. Finally in Dunkirk, they were detained once more. Fimmen intervened again and they were briefly released, but were then re-interned as Enemy Aliens after the outbreak of war. Fimmen again obtained their release but, finally they were interned by the French Vichy government in a North African camp, extradited to the Gestapo and Werner was subsequently killed in the Gestapo prison on Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse in Berlin. "Among those who first climbed the scaffold of Hitler," wrote Lehmann, "were German seafarers".[146]

Although under increased pressure from the surveillance of the Belgian police and Gestapo agents, the ITF Group continued to protect German refugees, although a handful were expelled in late 1938 and early 1939. Although it is hard to ascertain the details, they smuggled endangered people out, including members of ISK, the KPD-O[147] and *Neu Beginnen*[148] and, occasionally 'stowaways', who sometimes had to pay. Thirty-two people, mostly Jews, were taken to England and twelve to North America.

The ITF's clandestine work became increasingly dangerous. The Gestapo had attributed the ITF's activities to the KPD and when they finally realised, in 1937, that the ITF was a separate organisation, intensified their pursuit. The denunciations of an Antwerp V-man i.e. agent for the Gestapo, led to three of the ITF's leading members and 16 ITF seafarers being arrested in Antwerp. The one plus from this was that it made the ITF very aware of the threat of informers and how closely militants were being watched. By the end of 1938, the ITF had to scale back their visits and stop distributing leaflets in the harbour; by 1939, they had stopped altogether.[149]

[146] Dieter Nelles, "Werner Lehmann", *Das interaktive Gedenkbuch für die NS-Opfer aus Wuppertal*.
[147] The Communist Party of Germany, Opposition (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Opposition*), KPO or KPD(O)), was a group that split off from the KPD in 1928, most of whose members had belonged to the KPD. Never sure whether it wanted to be a rival party or a pressure group on the KPD, it seriously diverged from the KPD when it supported the united front.
[148] *Neu Beginnen*, formed in 1929 largely by a left split of the SPD, emphasised the importance of collaboration on the left, but not especially of working class activity. Many of its leaders fled and it then operated principally from the UK.
[149] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, pp., 172, 186, 192.

The synthesis between German seafarer trade-union activists and a militant international union organisation was a remarkable achievement, given the Nazis targeting of left-wing militants. It was in part a long-term product of the militancy of the German sailors which started on 29 October 1918, when the sailors of the German Navy had mutinied when ordered to continue the fight against the British, precipitating mass strikes across much of Germany, leading on to unsuccessful revolutions in different cities in Germany. Many German sailors had adopted, through their subsequent struggles, a revolutionary syndicalist position, which chimed with the politics of the ITF. In addition, seafarers were relatively independent: they were not under the constant eyes of the Gestapo, though there were regularly spies aboard, nor did they generally benefit economically under Nazism. The ITF leadership and members and especially their Antwerp group had an acute awareness of how the Nazis were out to destroy the organised working class movement and this led a rare early commitment to the anti-Nazi struggle.

Inland waterway workers: the Rhine boat men

The Rhine boat and barge men's working and living conditions were as poor as the seafarers: long working hours and low wages. The Communist-led Association of Seafarers, Dockers and Inland Waterway Workers (EVSHB) was strong in the Rhine area and inland ports, where they had about 1000 members, 318 of whom paid dues, especially among those employed by French companies as neither the German nor French official trade unions defended them.

Although the majority of Rhine boatmen had an anti-fascist attitude, the ITF group did not succeed in establishing a fixed circle of contacts for a number of reasons: there was a high labour turnover, union membership was low, and there was competition for members. The boatmen were less often in Antwerp and more often in Germany so contacting them was more difficult, which made them far more vulnerable to the Gestapo who kept a high level of surveillance over them and, finally, they did not have the historical experiences of 1918/19.

Nevertheless, the Rhine boatmen helped maintain ITF contacts in Germany and, from 1938, would smuggle in and distribute illegal literature, for example to Hamburg, where the ITF group had links with a resistance group of boatmen, dockworkers and shipyard workers. The Gestapo made many arrests but did not manage to break them. The reconstruction of the Hamburg trade unions after the war owed much to the "illegal organisation of a large part of the Hamburg trade union members and trade union officials during the twelve years of the Hitler regime", in particular of metal and transport workers.[150]

[150] Ibid., pp.178 & 180-182.
Spliedt, Franz, *Die Gewerkschaften: Entwicklungen und Erfolge, Ihr Wiederaufbau nach 1945*, Hamburg 1947.

Railway workers / Union of Railway Workers in Germany

Although not their main arena of work, Edo Fimmen and the ITF encouraged anti-Nazi activities on the German railways.

Hans Jahn, the secretary of the railway union, was the key figure in organising the underground anti-Nazi struggle among railway workers. Jahn belonged to the left-wing social democratic minority in the railway union and did not go along with the union's legalistic approach to the Nazis. In 1932, Jahn had already helped create a network of railway workers in Saxony who, in the event of a general strike against the Nazis, would have brought the railways to a halt.

Hans Jahn

It is now easy to forget how indispensable the *Reichsbahn* and its staff were to the Nazi war-time project, especially when it came to deportations, particularly of Jews, as well as the transport of military equipment. But well before that, the Director of the *Reichsbahn*, Julius Dorpmüller, supported Third Reich policy, dismissing Jewish railway officials, and boycotting Jewish suppliers as well as purging politically suspect railway workers. As history shows, many railway workers concurred.[151] The resistance work of the underground was therefore all the more remarkable.

In September 1933, Jahn had met with ITF Assistant General Secretary, Jacobus Oldenbroek, in Berlin and in November 1933, with Fimmen in Amsterdam. They planned to re-establish contact with railway workers and rail union officials. Fimmen made a point of meeting leading cadres, discussing illegal work with around 27 railway workers. In particular Fimmen wanted to know about the mood and work situation of the workforce and their attitude to the Reich Government and to emphasise the importance of paying attention to the transport of military equipment.[152]

Jacobus Oldenbroek became a key figure in anti-Nazi organising. He and Fimmen had worked together for ITF from 1921; in 1937, Oldenbroek became ITF's Assistant General Secretary. In this role, he concentrated on building an underground network of German sailors. He took over after Fimmen's death. He became the General Secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in 1949.

[151] Gottwaldt , Alfred, *Eisenbahner gegen Hitler. Widerstand und Verfolgung bei der Reichsbahn 1933–1945* Wiesabden: Marix Verlag, 2009.
[152] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, pp. 273-4.

Jahn had salvaged 17,000 index cards with members' addresses before the Nazis managed to seize them. He had already selected 107 of them to set up a resistance group when he met Oldenbroek. Jahn and Oldenbroek became the chief links between the ITF and the illegal transport groups. Oldenbroek regularly met with the illegal groups in Hamburg and Stettin. Illegal groups were also formed in Pomerania and East Prussia. In 1934, to disguise his illegal and dangerous work, Jahn nominally became a representative of a Dutch wine trader in Amsterdam.

According to a list that Jahn made in the spring of 1935, he had up to around 150 bases in 17 districts, many from Saxony and Württemberg. In Hamburg, there were several groups with about 500 members and in Germany as a whole, there were a total of 103 trade union oriented groups, with membership varying from three to eighty. Jahn kept in contact with these groups using code such as the picture on the postcard: train station = danger, gardens = everything is flourishing. The railway workers' and the ITF's secret network became key in establishing contacts with reliable German comrades, the gathering of information and carrying illegal anti-fascist leaflets and newsletters into the Reich.

Eventually, an extended network of illegal contacts among railway workers emerged, especially in northern and western Germany, though there were also a few contacts also in southern Germany. Illegal ISK material was concealed on trains, for example from Amsterdam via Basle or Cologne. Despite arrests in western Germany and Saxony, Jahn said he had direct connections to 13 cities in the Reich in March in 1939, as well as indirect connections to other cities.[153]

The ITF rail workers deposited the smuggled pamphlets in the sleeping cars of the express trains or behind window shutters. The local ISK members, who had the details of the train and its number, then retrieved the pamphlets from their hiding places while the train stopped. Material could then be smuggled out, for example in a briefcase with a secret compartment.[154] Local bases, such as in Göttingen and Hannover, picked up around 300 to 400 copies at the station.

The underground papers of the Union of Railway Workers in Germany / ITF section and ISK's illegal material were concealed on trains, including the ISKs Reinhardt Letters produced monthly, and the *Sozialistische Warte* (ISK Resistance). In 1936, Eichler, leader of the ISK, reported that the number of groups of the Independent Socialist Trade Union created around these publications as 60 in a total of 25 locations, principally around Cologne, Görlitz and Hamburg.[155]

The pamphlets were mostly four-pages and printed on thin paper; the comrades were instructed to swallow them in an emergency: "You can swallow leaflets even if you

[153] "Hans Jahn". *German Resistance Memorial Centre*.
"Obituary: Hans Jahn". *Report of the World Congress of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions*, 1962.
[154] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität.*
[155] http://www.stadtarchiv.goettingen.de/widerstand/texte/itf-verbindungsweg-illegale-schriften.html.

haven't much practice!" In March 1934, Hans Jahn informed Eichler: "The leaves [of paper] cannot be swallowed.... Please for the next shipment: smaller and thinner sheets".[156]

The Gestapo uncovered the ITF network following a conference organised by the ITF in Roskilde, Denmark in April 1935 which 31 representatives of illegal groups in Germany attended, although the west German railway workers' group had, wisely, decided against going. The subsequent arrests were a setback, but the ITF continued to be active among railway workers in the Cologne/Wuppertal area, distributing illegal pamphlets, until the Gestapo also uncovered this network.

On January 17, 1936, a large number of the ISK activists in Göttingen were arrested, including some from the ITF. Ed Fimmen wrote to Willi Eichler on January 21, 1936: "Yesterday we received the message from Göttingen that something was wrong there, that is, in all likelihood, someone had been blown. We will send someone there who will find out about the situation on the spot. Do you know anything else?" Eichler replied that they knew little. Three days later, on January 26, 1936, Eichler again wrote to Fimmen: "Dear friend, I have just received the sad news from Göttingen that a number of colleagues there have been blown...for various reasons...I have been asked to ensure that no post is sent to my colleagues there. Otherwise more can easily go wrong."

On 12 February 1936, Jahn reported to Fimmen that about "65 people allegedly belonging to the Nelson movement [the ITF] were arrested on January 16, 1936 in Göttingen" including four railway employees. "The reason...was the distribution of illegal magazines and leaflets". He suspected this would not lead back to the ISK but that the arrest would have a bad effect on the network.[157] The immediate cause, however, seems to have been a denunciation by a caretaker of comrades at a meeting. There was much concern that the people arrested and tortured might give away information. Although this did not happen, the ISK organisation in Gottingen collapsed.[158]

The level of organisation and militancy varied across Germany and declined as the Nazi grip tightened and ITF militants were arrested. Nevertheless, from 1936, the ITF newspaper *Fahrt-Frei* was still published especially for railway workers. In one article, it was reported that shop stewards in southern Germany had obtained a pay rise, interpreted to show that solidarity action could still be successful.[159]

It is impossible to know the extent to which the Gestapo and arrests limited railway workers clandestine activities, but it was considerably weakened. Jahn divided up Germany into districts. According to Jahn's own information, on 1 March 1936, after the Gestapo arrests, the organisation still had 137 bases with 284 base leaders and included a

[156] International Youth Federation (IJB) / ISK, file group: ISK, correspondence B (1933 – 1946), 4, March 30, 1934, Hans Jahn to Eichler.
[157] www.stadtarchiv.goettingen.de/widerstand/texte/itf-raw.html.
[158] www.stadtarchiv.goettingen.de/widerstand/texte/isk-verhaftungen-und-prozess.html.
[159] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, p.275-6.

total of 1320 officials. But, to limit the danger, Jahn and the ITF now discouraged contact with ISK or, indeed the ITF, except for the respective district leaders.

Some comrades had only one or two contacts, others maintained larger cells. But there were Gestapo agents everywhere. In 1937, on the German border, illegal material was discovered in a car and 19 people arrested. In 1937-8, Bertel, a former KPD member, had formed an illegal group of ten and reported to Jahn on the existence of other illegal groups. Many were subsequently arrested and sent to the camps if they survived the interrogation. As it later turned out, Bertel was an undercover agent for the Gestapo. The fear of the Gestapo and of infiltration meant trusting anybody or organising underground became ever more fraught.[160] The railroad workers network was largely torn apart. Hans Jahn went to Luxembourg in March 1938 and, with great difficulty, established 20 personal connections again. But the network was only partially restored by the beginning of the Second World War.

Nevertheless, as late as September 1943, the ITF issued an extraordinary appeal to the German railway workers.

German railway workers!

For ten years, the iron Nazi terror prevented you from attaining the great ideals of international solidarity and socialism, which formerly inspired German railway workers... [Now we have to] actively participate in the destruction of the German war machine. ... The railway workers in the occupied countries are sabotaging the Nazis' railway system with all their might, one of the weakest points in German warfare.

And what can you do, German railway workers? ... One of the most important is through the transportation system...We know what we ask of you. We know we are calling on prisoners to tackle their heavily armed guards... The ITF has always supported the illegal organizations of German railway workers under their recently deceased, unforgettable leader Edo Fimmen Your comrades around the world expect you to do your duty. Help them to create the conditions for peace through the destruction of the Nazi war machine.[161]

Though one can not know how many, this reveals that at least a few people from the ITF and the Transport Workers Union were still organising in September 1943.

Earlier, Jahn's clandestine work on behalf of the ITF had also included non-railway connections. In June 1934, a Berlin local committee had been formed to include metal workers and printers. The ITF and the metalworkers had connections from earlier struggles. But, in 1935, many of the leading militants in metal were either arrested or fled.

[160] *Ibid*., p. 277.
[161] http://www.stadtarchiv.goettingen.de/widerstand/pdf/itf-sabotageaufruf-deutsche-eisenbahner.pdf.

Again, a traitor was suspected. Later, Jahn reported that there were links established with the garment workers' association and the factory workers' association.

But one must beware understanding what was happening on the railways and indeed more broadly, through the lens of the limited resistance activities. In practice many in the ITF and the Rail Union, while being strongly anti-Nazi, were not actively involved in underground work. Nobody can blame them given how few of those who were active managed to survive.

Spanish Civil War

The armed resistance against the Francoists strengthened the hopes of the ITF that German fascism would be overthrown. From 1936, Spain became a key field of action for the ITF. The Antwerp ITF's slogan was: 'Today Spain, tomorrow Germany"! Going on the offensive became imaginable.

Six or seven German sailors from the Antwerp ITF group, including Kurt Lehmann, joined an international militia, dominated by the KPD. Lehmann was elected shop steward by the German volunteers, whereupon Hans Beimler, the KPD representative in Barcelona, expelled him and others. Relationships between the Comintern apparatchiks and ITF members were hostile. Lehmann and comrades then joined and fought with the Anarchist Durruti Column, where there were already several other German sailors. The Sacco and Vanzetti Battery, in which some German militiamen fought, included the anarcho-syndicalist Paul Chacon who, along with a few dozen other German anarcho-syndicalists had been living in Barcelona since 1932. Chacon became the commander of this artillery unit, and Ernst Günther, a former Communist, became its military advisor.

The ITF sought to report back, delay or stop the transport of weapons, ammunition or any other war material to the Francoists from Antwerp. The ITF shop stewards who sailed from Antwerp on ships under the German flag, about seven to ten a month, reported on the location of an airport, an ammunition depot near Seville, the strength of German troops as well as German submarines and munitions ships in Spanish waters. Sometimes, they paid some of their Spanish informants. But apparently they did not go in for sabotage on the ships because of the risk to life and limb of all the sailors. Some KPD members did however commit sabotage.[162]

In Spring 1937, the SS Thalia left Antwerp for Pasajes in Spain, carrying a cargo of 1500 tons of phosphate produced by IG Farben corporation, a long-term active collaborator with the Nazis. A sailor on board reported back from Pasajes to the Antwerp group on the dense German military build-up. He stated that a number of *Neptun* ships were in the harbour, as well as a German submarine, U27, and the ship Wollin, which was a floating military base supplying the Nazi forces. The report also noted that the Basque dockworkers unloaded the Thalia extremely slowly. There were many German military

[162] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, p. 206.

formations in the port, airmen, anti-aircraft specialists, and drivers, all wearing Spanish uniforms.[163]

The sailors were discontented with their officers and their conditions and often did not know the ships' destination was Spain. The more militant among them then jumped ship and informed the ITF who passed on the information to the press and the Belgian government that the Bremen Neptune ships which called in at Antwerp had "part loads of ammunition or other war material on board": the Belgian authorities did nothing.[164]

In late 1936, the ITF, supported by the Scandinavian trade unions, wanted to impose a complete blockade of trade with the Francoists. But this initiative met with resistance from the British trade unions and the TUC which supported the British government's non-intervention policy in Spain and were not prepared to support solidarity actions that went beyond humanitarian aid.[165]

When a short time later the Scandinavian trade unions held a conference of the Seafarers' and Dockers' Sections of the ITF to take further action, the British trade-unions did not participate. Ernest Bevin even suggested that the Transport and General Workers' Union disaffiliate from the ITF. Eventually one delegate from the National Union of Seamen attended the conference. But the resolution adopted did not commit the British trade unions, revealing the ITF's weakness.[166]

The ships that brought goods and weapons to the Republican side were controlled by the ITF. According to Fimmen, this was "extremely important" because "fascists had crept into the team, carried out informer work, sabotaged the transports and tried to play them into the hands of the rebels, which unfortunately succeeded several times". However, terrible misunderstandings arose because the Republican government would not work with the ITF. The Norwegian steamship Rona was carrying weapons for the Spanish Republic, arranged by ITF, but the dockers refused to unload believing they were for the Francoists. Meanwhile, the Berlin arms dealer, Veltjens, who handled the German arms sales to Franco, also supplied the Spanish republican government with ammunition.

The ITF leadership collected funds to support the dependents of their supporters who had died at the front and to purchase two ambulances. Fimmen also intervened to get his members released who had been taken prisoner by the Communists. After the armed clashes between anarchists and Communists in Barcelona in early May 1937, mainly foreign supporters of the anarchist CNT/FAI and the Marxist POUM were arrested on suspicion of espionage.[167] They were taken to the secret prison at the Puerta del Angel.

[163] Hyslop, *German Seafarers, Anti-Fascism and the Anti-Stalinist Left.*
[164] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, p. 200.
[165] ITF, *¡No pasarán! The ITF and the fight against fascism*, London, 2016, p.13.
[166] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, p. 193.
[167] Letters from Krause to Fimmen, 17 August and 17 November 1937.

After a hunger strike, two of the arrested, Fallen and Krause, were finally released after Fimmen intervened with the Spanish War Minister.

Although there are some questions about source reliability, Hamburg dock workers may have carried out acts of sabotage at the loading site and German seafarers may have refused to transport arms to Spain. But the ITF rejected such strikes because of the terrible personal risks involved.[168] According to the memoirs of Fritz Eberhard, the German leader of the ISK group in the ITF, there were plans to hijack a German ship carrying war material and take it to the Republican side, but this failed.

The newspaper *Die Schiffahrt* became a key tool, informing sailors about almost all the "special steamers" that carried weapons and troops. Hermann Knüfken wrote its leading articles, showing a clear syndicalist tendency[169]. *Die Schiffahrt* urged seafarers, bargemen and dock workers to look out for and report the delivery of war material and troop transports. The Hamburg company Mathias Rohde & Co Frachtkontor chartered special steamers sailing under the Panamanian flag to carry heavy war equipment to Spain. In December 1936, *Die Schiffahrt* reported that, according to "absolutely reliable reports from German ports and ships", 26 German steamers had recently carried "war material of all kinds and troops ...from Stettin, Lübeck, Emden, Hamburg and Königsberg to Cadiz and Sevile'. For example, the steamship "Königsstein" in November 1936 had carried heavy war equipment and about 200 Reichswehr "allegedly for an air defence exercise on the island of Rügen, but in reality to Spain, namely to Seville" Knowing this is of course very different from stopping it. One exception occurred in Poland in September 1936, during the loading of war material in the Stettin harbour, the Gestapo reported that the workers were deliberately delaying the punctual departure of the transport steamer, had attempted to smash the ammunition boxes and then dared to ask for a wage increase.[170]

A 1938 issue of *Die Schiffahrt* demanded

> *German Seafarers! Report all weapons shipments that are leaving German ports bound for the Spanish fascists! Stop these transports by any means! Down with fascism! Long live the victory of the Spanish workers and peasants! ... 26 steamers carrying war material and Reichswehr troops have departed from Stettin, Lübeck, Emden, Hamburg und Königsberg bound to Cadiz and Sevilla.... Sailors, dockers and inland waterway men! The defeat of the fascist generals in Spain is the defeat of Germany and Italy! The victory of the Spanish workers and farmers is our victory! First Spain then Germany! Long live a free, socialist Spain*![171]

[168] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, p. 200.
[169] Nelles, Dieter, "Das abenteuerliche Leben des Hermann Knüfken. Ein demokratischer Revolutionär", in: *ÖTV-Report Seefahrt* Nr. 3/1996.
[170] Nelles, *Widerstand und internationale Solidarität*, p. 201.
[171] Presentation by Hamburger Friends of the XI International Brigade, Duckdalben International Seamen's Club, Hamburg during the Anti-fascist Harbour Days, 2016.

Conclusion

The looming defeat of the Spanish Republic from 1937 was in many ways a turning point for the ITF group and Fimmen, who became convinced that war in Europe was inevitable. While previously having rejected any form of bourgeois alliance, a belief now came to the fore that they needed to work with capitalist democracies to effectively combat Nazi Germany. From 1938/39, Fimmen and the ITF cooperated with western intelligence services, but he was clear about his political allegiances. He wrote in November 1939: "The ITF takes part in the war, not behind France and England, but against Hitler and his open and secret allies". It was, he continued, "a fight to the death against the Nazi and Fascist regimes which had crushed the free labour movements… persecuted, imprisoned and murdered so many of its [the ITF's] friends, and which aimed to enslave the workers of the world".[172]

The ISK, based in Switzerland, supported cooperating with the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a British secret service organisation formed to organise sabotage and resistance in occupied Europe. For example, in 1941, Robert Bertholet, a member of ISK with many contacts in the resistance across Europe, was sent by SOE to establish contact with ITF, in particular railroad workers and to promote the ISK's appeal to German left-wingers to carry out sabotage, a strategy the ITF endorsed.[173] Also with the support of SOE, Hilda Monte (Meisel) travelled to Lisbon as a courier for the ITF, from where she contacted Bertholet in Switzerland. She was later murdered by the SS while on active service in Austria. In April 1944, ISK member Änne Kappius traveled to Germany disguised as a Red Cross sister and in September 1944, her husband, Jupp Kappius, parachuted into Germany at least in part to collect information about Germany's transport capacities and to encourage 'activities ... in the Ruhr'. In January 1945 Kappius noted how many of the locomotives had been damaged by Allied bombs.[174] Until the end of the war, Kappius tried to build up and maintain groups in the Ruhr and other parts of Germany.

The ITF and the ISK planned to bring together individuals and groups isolated in Germany in cooperation with the American OSS to create a functioning underground organisation to commit sabotage and help undermine Nazi support, but it soon became apparent that they all had overestimated the possibilities for action in Germany. Unlike in France, there were few possibilities for strike action, even by the committed anti-Nazi railway network. The Gestapo was not just still intact but they and the SS were becoming increasingly brutal as Germany got closer and closer to losing the war.

[172] Nelles *The Repressed Resistance.*
[173] Seaman, Mark, *Undercover agents: How one of SOE's youngest agents helped defeat the Nazis*, London: John Blake, 2018
[174] "Der verdrängte Widerstand. Die Erinnerung an den Widerstand der Internationalen Transportarbeiterföderation (ITF) in den deutschen Gewerkschaften", in: Stefan Berger (ed.): *Gewerkschaftsgeschichte als Erinnerungsgeschichte*, Essen 2015, S. 375-400.

The later publications of ITF show a clear social democratic emphasis on the importance of establishing a parliamentary and democratic system in post-war Germany and the need therefore to give their backing to the Allies, hopefully in return for the Allies helping them. But it did them no good. British and French intelligence would not play ball with what Fimmen wanted. The British called off the planned sabotage operations in Scandinavia and the French could not or would not do anything about the ITF seafarers' residence permits. In addition, ISK overestimated the resistance of the German working class: there were only isolated acts of sabotage on German ships and Vichy France detained some of its seafarers. However, SOE apparently did plan an escape of imprisoned ITF cadres in France. The railway workers' organisation however remained relatively intact. Jahn stated that considerable acts of sabotage were carried out by those who he referred to as ‘illegals’.

The anti-Nazi underground movement was not celebrated after the war had ended. Jahn, who had done so much, exemplifies this. When he returned to Germany with the help of the American secret service in April 1945, Jahn felt himself to be defamed by some of his union colleagues as a "paid agent of a foreign power". He had himself certified by the ITF as wearing the "uniform for civilian employees of the American army", but to have "never been a member of an Allied troop unit". Jahn saw the accusations levelled against him as evidence for the continued existence of ex-Nazis in positions of power. "Germany is still a haven for the Nazis and a hell for the anti-Nazis!" he wrote.[175]

What stands out from the underground work of the ITF is its strong anti-Nazi position. This was in part a consequence of trade union demands for better wages or conditions being illegal and thus political, but the ITF increasingly gave precedence to the anti-Nazi activities of its working class members and affiliated organisations.

The ITF’s organisation of resistance has been interpreted in diverse ways. Did their failure to overthrow or even moderate Nazism indicate how little effect they had? Instead, our position is that, though hardly known of in the UK, even among the left, the history of the ITF in the 1930s reminds us of how much working class resistance there was to Nazism. Against a background of a government colluding with and appeasing the Nazis, the anti-Nazi resistance of many groups of workers in Antwerp is historic. The ITF and its supporters in Antwerp and elsewhere also succeeded, despite the desperate dangers, in helping to organise resistance among a minority of German seafarers and other transport workers. Let it never be said that working class people did not risk and lay down their lives to defeat Nazism.

[175] Jahn to Auerbach, November 6, 1947.

The Working Class, Imperialism and Fascism

By Steve Cushion

The Second World War was much more complicated than the First. Its roots lay in the rivalry between two imperialist blocs, the Axis and the Anglo-French allies. However, unlike in the First World War, it is necessary to add the question of democracy and the struggle against fascism because an Axis victory would have resulted in the crushing of workers' organisations throughout Europe. This gave the working class an additional motivation in the war and the analysis of the conflict an added level of complication. Moreover, in France, the majority of the ruling class collaborated with the Nazis thereby giving a war of national liberation the added character of a civil war. This aspect of civil war was particularly pronounced in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais.

Donny Gluckstein's *A People's History of the Second World War* argues that there were two parallel wars, a "People's War" and an "Imperialist War". Many of France's rulers had been more afraid of the Popular Front than they were of the Germans and the events of 1934-36 had badly scared the French bourgeoisie; a 1941 letter from a Lille factory owner to his trade newspaper: "I would rather see my country occupied by the Germans than my factory occupied by the workers".[176] The Munich Agreement, Roosevelt's election promise to stay out of any European conflict and the Hitler-Stalin Pact show the reluctance of the ruling elites of all the major future Allied powers to go to war, in part because they well remembered the revolutionary situation in which the First World War ended.

The French and British governments were forced to go to war in defence of Poland because they saw, and saw very much more clearly than Stalin, that the invasion of Poland was a prelude to the invasion of Russia. If the German army had managed to conquer Russia, that country's vast natural resources, when combined with German industrial strength, would have meant that Germany could have dominated the world economy and won any future war with any or all of the Allies. So, the Allied rulers had a difficult balancing act to perform, to persuade their citizens to fight an imperialist war and to avoid that war ending in a revolutionary situation in the manner of 1914-1918. Stressing the anti-fascist aspects of the war was an effective way of doing this; class-conscious workers were rightly appalled at the way fascism was rolling out over Europe, smashing trade unions and workers' parties, cutting wages and reinforcing the class power of the bourgeoisie. This fear of fascism was completely justified, however was unconditional support for Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt and de Gaulle the best way to defeat fascism?

The ITF leadership argued for a workers' united front against fascism from the early 1930s. They eventually cooperated with the intelligence services of the imperialist powers, SOE and OSS, but only when it appeared that the chance of the workers themselves

[176] Revue du Nord, *L'Occupation en France et en Belgique 1940-44* , No 2 (hors série), Lille, 1988, p746

overthrowing the Nazis was a forlorn hope. Even then, they did not restrict the class based demands they were raising. They had made a valiant attempt to create a workers' united front, by prioritising anti-Nazi trade unionism, both legal and illegal, recognising from the beginning the dreadful threat that fascism posed to workers' self-organisation and working class living standards. Equally, even though the Communist militants in northern France and Belgium publicly advocated a Popular Front, the logic of which is to subordinate workers' class interests to an alliance with the so-called progressive bourgeoisie against fascism, in practice they maintained their struggle for food, wages and safe working, fighting for their class interests to the end.

The International Transport Federation also used the same shop steward structure that was so successful in the mines and engineering industry of the region. They all organised workers where they worked, irrespective of legal definitions of citizenship. The militants in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais worked alongside Polish and Italian Communist and anti-fascist miners, to the mutual benefit of all workers in the region. The Belgian Communists supported refugees from Germany in attempts to undermine the German army and worked closely with Jewish refugees from eastern Europe in their armed struggle for survival. In both areas escaped Russian prisoners of war were aided and integrated into the armed resistance. The Antwerp Group of the ITF worked with German workers in the port of Antwerp in an attempt to organise transnational anti-fascist resistance. In all these cases, they worked to unite the working class where they found them, irrespective of citizenship, national or cultural differences.

There are parallels too in the use of armed force against fascism. The Belgian and northern French workers were in the forefront of the armed resistance during the Second World War, the ITF was one of the earliest international working class supports for the armed resistance to Franco in Spain.

In contrast to this, the majority of reformist workers' leaders, having done little to prevent the rise of fascism, helped the Allies fight the war in such a way as to avoid independent working class activity: advocating no-strike agreements and promoting increased production in Britain and the USA, while urging the resistance to subordinate its activities to the needs of the Allied High Command in the occupied countries. However, given the nature of underground resistance movements, this latter aim was only partially successful. Describing the resistance as part of a "People's War" is useful. It indicates that it was a rebellion seeking social improvements but recognises that it was a cross class movement involving workers, peasants and elements of the petite-bourgeoisie. There was not the revolutionary leadership to turn this into a revolution, but the fear of such a revolution was still enough to win considerable social reforms.[177]

[177] Gluckstein, Donny, *A People's History of the Second World War: Resistance Versus Empire*, London: Pluto, 2012.

A conventional British military history, thousands of examples of which fill the remaindered shelves of many bookshops, sees little importance in the role of the resistance in defeating Germany, in "winning the war". In France, where the *Résistance* is an essential part of national mythology, right-wing historians question whether the strikes we have recounted actually count as resistance because they were undertaken for economic, not patriotic motives. At best the events are seen as interesting local history.

However, if we are interested in history from below, the account of working class organisation in northern France and Belgium takes on a much greater significance. True there were general strikes in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Marseille, Turin, Milan, Athens, even tiny Luxembourg, but these were one-off affairs, important in themselves, but we are not aware of such sustained industrial militancy anywhere else during the Second World War as occurred in northern France and Belgium. The movement's ability to adopt techniques of urban terrorism and sabotage while maintaining a mass movement is also exceptional. But most significantly these working class resistance movements based themselves on shop stewards and workplace delegates.

I would argue that the importance of this history as a lesson for today is twofold. The current crisis is different from the 1930s, not only is there an economic crisis, but climate change adds an additional dimension. Faced with this dual crisis, the ruling class are as intent as ever on maintaining their profit levels and the response from many governments has been an increase in authoritarianism and repression, while conducting an ideological offensive based on racism and nationalism. The employers are using the current public health crisis to erode workers' conditions and increase precarity. This is not 1930s fascism, but it is still potentially devastating for the workers' movement. The response of the militant workers of northern France and Belgium sets us a good example. They organised immigrant workers and sought to overcome racist divisions. Women were central to the campaigns to maintain living standards. They linked the fight against fascism with the struggle for workers’ rights and conditions of employment. And they did all this through a well organised network of shop stewards and workplace delegates that did not rely on the trade union bureaucracy, but was capable of independent action. The British shop stewards' movement is a shadow of its previous strength, if we are to defeat the employers' offensive, we need to rebuild those workplace structures.

The working class movement of Belgium and northern France gives us an example of courage and determination which shows that it is possible to both fight fascism and maintain the struggle for workers’ rights and conditions of employment even in the most difficult circumstances. Their history shows the importance of the class struggle in the fight against fascism and, finally, the difficulty of getting rid of the fascists once they are established highlights the importance of crushing them while they are still few in number.

On Strike Against the Nazis

Class Struggle and Resistance in Northern France and Belgium during the Second World War
By *Steve Cushion*

The class struggle did not disappear during the Second World War following the occupation of Europe by the German armed forces. In northern France and Belgium a shop steward-based movement quickly emerged, mainly led by communist activists, that attempted to defend and advance wages and conditions and, above all access to sufficient food for working class families. In so doing, they organised an impressive series of strikes that involved nearly a quarter of a million workers and won some significant material gains although at the cost of severe repression with many activists being killed in prison or while resisting arrest. A significant number of these militants, when on the run from the forces of repression, fought back with armed attacks and sabotage. The hunted became the hunters.

The International Transport Workers' Federation and Working Class Resistance to the Nazis
By *Merilyn Moos*

The leadership of the trade unions and the social democratic parties of Europe did not play any significant role in the resistance to the growth and spread of fascism in the 1930s and 40s. The major exception to this pattern was the International Transport Workers' Federation led by Edo Fimmen, which defied convention by organising illegal underground resistance groups amongst German seafarers, dockers and railway workers as well as bringing aid and solidarity to the republican forces during the Spanish civil war.

This pamphlet examines the connection between the class struggle and anti-fascist politics as well as the relationship between mass action and the armed struggle under a repressive regime. In so doing, we add a discussion of class into the historiography of the Second World War which, with a few exceptions, is dominated by an analysis based on an assumption of patriotism and class collaboration, and which explains the Nazis and other fascists as representing "evil", without looking for the class interests they represented.

Steve Cushion and **Merilyn Moos** are joint authors of ***Anti-Nazi Germans***

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