The SIRC column

Study looks at mixed nationality crews

Professor Tony Lane, director of the Seafarers' International Research Centre, looks at some of the results of research into creeping patterns

FIFTEEN or so years ago, in the first half of the 1980s, a lot of ships began to acquire what were often called “exotic” crews. Seized by an economic crisis where there were too many ships chasing dwindling volumes of cargo, ship owners looked for cheaper and cheaper staffing solutions. The first step was flagging out and the second was recruiting seafarers from countries where employment costs were relatively low. Most of the world’s ships continued to be owned in Europe or Japan but European and Japanese crews were replaced by ship owners, who had previously been recruiting in S and SE Asia. By the 1990s, Eastern European crews joined them and in 1995, ship owners made their first visits to Panama, where 11 out of 61 vessels flying the Panamanian flag were: Cyprus, where we have been pointed out that ships’ crews have frequently been formed in the past out of peoples drawn from a wide variety of world regions. In his wonderful book, Spain’s Man of the Sea, the historian P.E. Perez-Mallaina notes that Spanish ships in the early 16th century usually had half their crews made up of Italians, French and Portuguese. In his book on English ships in the 17th and 18th centuries, Peter Earle notes that “Swedes and Danes, Germans and Dutchmen, Italians, Greeks and Portuguese, Hanseatics, and Portuguese were commonly employed to make good the shortcomings of British seamen brought about by the British navy’s practice of forcibly stealing men from other nations.” The same practices later in the century often stripped British crews of all their nationals when they were lying in Calcutta. The only way for these ships to get home was by recruiting local labour. It was the Napoleonic wars that saw the development of a more organized labour market for Indian seamen on European ships.

Ever since the beginning of long-distance seafaring, trade—mixed nationality crews have been common, and for pretty prosaic reasons. Deaths from tropical diseases and violent encounters with indigenous peoples and other practical adversities, malnutrition and disease meant that the ships of a Gama, Magellan and Drake, for example, could only return home by finding local replacements. Later, and especially from the 18th century when world trade became more and more organised, the larger ports of Europe and America had developed “sailortowns” made up of seafarers from around the world who were bored at home. The catch-as-catch-can method of recruiting crews from the ever-shifting salontowns populations virtually guaranteed that crews of British ships were multinational. By the second half of the 19th century and throughout into the post-WW1 decades, British sailing ships’ fo’ciles might have housed Wallachians, Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, French, Flemish, Italians, Afri-Americans, Japanese, Chinese, Cape Verdians, Chalier and Scots. In short, though the word was not then used, “exotic” crews.

It may be tempting because of the obvious similarities, but it is neverthe- less a mistake, to suppose that during the closing decades of the 20th century we have simply seen history repeating itself in respect of crewing practices. The multinational crews of the 19th century British sailing ships were not chosen by shipowners and their agents on the basis of rational calculation of cost (because everyone, regardless of nationality, had the same wage) nor were nationalities mixed as a result of perception who mixed with whom. Crews were assembled from among those who presented themselves for the ship. The modern seafarers’ labour market is highly organized. Shipowners and shipmanagers have crewing policies which are continu- ously reviewed as new information arrives, and whole crews are assembled by phone, fax and email and flown around the world. This organisation, furthermore, is reinforced and its reach extended when large employers regularly travel the world to check the existing supply chain and take measures of potential new sources of labour. Organisation of this kind transforms the employer into concentrating their supply chains in a relatively small number of countries at any one time. It also encourages them to develop definite policies regarding how far particular nationalities are best kept in single nationality crews, or can be mixed with other nationalities. To the extent that there is a widely held view on the optimal use of a mixed nationality workforce, the notion is that, while it may be safe and preferable to have a mixed nationality force, even those who stand, wait and report any that are less than cohesive, they are likely to be more effective at maintaining the ship’s discipline and for pretty prosaic reasons. We have, for example, been pointed out that ships’ crews have frequently been formed in the past out of peoples drawn from a wide variety of world regions. In his wonderful book, Spain’s Man of the Sea, the historian P.E. Perez-Mallaina notes that Spanish ships in the early 16th century usually had half their crews made up of Italians, French and Portuguese. In his book on English ships in the 17th and 18th centuries, Peter Earle notes that “Swedes and Danes, Germans and Dutchmen, Italians, Greeks and Portuguese, Hanseatics, and Portuguese were commonly employed to make good the shortcomings of British seamen brought about by the British navy’s practice of forcibly stealing men from other nations.” The same practices later in the century often stripped British crews of all their nationals when they were lying in Calcutta. The only way for these ships to get home was by recruiting local labour. It was the Napoleonic wars that saw the development of a more organized labour market for Indian seamen on European ships.

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The obvious question then becomes “what are the impacts of utilising multi-national crews?”. This is the turn of Chinese and Indians. By the 1990s, ships of European ships.

As soon as a ship has a crew it has a “society” or, if you prefer, a “community” – a group of people living together in a relatively small space—where the observance of a set of rules and customs which are flexible and to some extent accommodating but tight enough to maintain cohesion. The obvious question where crews consist of different nationalities is how far crews of this sort are able to function cohesively. One of SIRC’s research projects has been looking at this question.

Over the past two years we have been looking at ships of different nationalities working in different trades, with a view to discovering what sort of impact mixed nationality crews have on shipboard society: we have made voyages on minibulkers, a feeder, a car carrier, a large container ship, a deep- sea to no, several tankers, a gas carrier and a long haul bulk carrier. We have not so far had the same combina- tion of nationalities. Where individual nationalities have been concerned, we have sailed with Filipinos, Bangladeshis, Indians, Chileans, Greeks, Venezuelans, Cape Verdians, Britons, Poles, Germans, Swedes, Croatsians. On the other hand, we have still to complete several more voyages to round off our programme, we are fairly confident that these are unlikely to disturb our conclusions: that mixed nationality crews work extremely well and that generally there is no reason to suppose that they are in any way inferior to single nationality crews.

They work best, of course, when employers have a strong anti-racial discrimination policy and good communications. Not only have we found no evidence whatever that nationality is a barrier to forming a cohesive shipboard society, but we have also found many seafarers who actually prefer mixed nationality crews.

After all, a single nationality crew will inevitably be some sort of microcosm of the society from which it is drawn and might therefore carry within it the conflicts of that society. Better, therefore, if one is to be kept up with small numbers of people for a long period, to have with families who have the same social background. Seafarers have often prided themselves on their internationalist traditions, their living and working traditions undoubtedly provide them with many opportunities to develop internationalist credentials. Perhaps, even, the contemporary seafarer is a prototype global citizen? I would like to think so.