

GERMAN-ICELANDIC FISHERIES HISTORY

ASPECTS OF THE DEVELOPMENT
SINCE 1945

Scientific Symposium
Accompanying the Opening Ceremony
of the Fisheries Memorial in Vík
(Reykjavík, Sept. 14th, 2002: Proceedings)

Contents

▶ Ingo Heidbrink	
Introduction	275
▶ Hendrik Dane	
Opening address	276
▶ Kristján Hjaltason	
Iceland and the German fish market 1950-1990: Did Germany get the fish it needed after the 200-mile extension?	277
▶ Gudni Th. Jóhannesson	
Did he matter? The colourful Andrew Gilchrist and the First Cod War between Britain and Iceland, 1958-61	287
▶ Ingo Heidbrink	
Continue trawling and continue negotiations: The 50-mile conflict	300
▶ Ingo Heidbrink	
The fisheries memorial in Vík í Mýrdal	308

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► INGO HEIDBRINK

Introduction

For the majority of the era of German deep-sea trawling, the grounds off Iceland were one of the main fishing regions for German trawlers. After a period of exploitation and the development of suitable fishing techniques at the end of the 19th century, a stable time of successful fishing extended through the first half of the 20th century. The second half of the 20th century was dominated by conflicts on the fishing limits – the so called cod-wars –, the decrease of German fishing activities in the Icelandic region, and the development of Icelandic fish-export to foreign markets like Germany.

This period was the special focus of a scientific symposium organised by the German Maritime Museum in cooperation with the Icelandic Centre for Fisheries History Research and accompanying the opening ceremony of the fisheries memorial in Vík í Mýrdal on Sept. 15th, 2002.

The three papers published in the following were held at this symposium by contemporary witnesses to the events as well as by professional historians and covered both the conflicts on fishing limits – including a comparative view on the British-Icelandic conflicts – and the establishment of the fish trade between Iceland and Germany. To complete the picture, a fourth article is included in this edition, providing a brief overview of the fisheries memorial in Vík í Mýrdal.

The symposium took place with the kind support of the Förderverein Deutsches Schifffahrtsmuseum e.V., the Goethe-Zentrum in Reykjavík, and the German Embassy in Iceland.

Opening address

It may sound strange, but in my eyes the Goethe-Zentrum is a better place to host a seminar on fishery relations between Germany and Iceland than any museum or university hall. The simple reason is that throughout the centuries of our bilateral relations, *culture and fish were the stable basis* on which these relations were founded. I should therefore like to thank both the Goethe-Zentrum and the Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum Bremerhaven – and here I want to mention especially Dr. Heidbrink – as the competent organizers of today's event, along with the many private persons who gave their wholehearted moral and financial support.

Ladies and gentlemen, we celebrate this year – 2002 – the 50th anniversary of official diplomatic relations between our two countries. But it is quite clear to all of us that our relations date back to much earlier times. I have already mentioned that fish was a stable element which tied us together. But is that really true? If we look into this matter more closely, we will notice that it was especially fishery around which extreme tensions between our two countries revolved. After all, it was the extension of the Icelandic Exclusive Fishing Zone which finally led to the almost complete disappearance of German fishing vessels in the Nordic oceans. And that led in turn to substantial unemployment and, consequently, to harsh private and public reactions in Germany. On the other hand, I should also like to mention that recently, when a German fish processing company went bankrupt, it was taken over by an Icelandic company, and the German employees of that company were happy that it was an Icelandic firm and not someone else who bought their company. The employees were extremely well aware of the fact that Icelanders are experts at fish and understand the fish business. The employees therefore felt that their company was in the right hands. These two examples are, so to speak, the famous two sides of the same coin. And I can repeat: Yes, fish has been and still is a stable element in our bilateral relations.

I do not hesitate to say that we are very pleased by the fact that the seminar approaches the important subject of our fishery relations in the scientifically appropriate manner. We are still close enough to the difficult times of the last century to relate our studies to personal testimony, while on the other hand the difficulties took place long enough ago to develop impartial analysis and objective reports on all the different developments. In my opinion it is also quite helpful to have the Icelandic-British fishing relations included in the studies, as we fished together in the same disputed fishery zones and were confronted with the same restrictive Icelandic decisions.

I am convinced that we will now witness a very interesting seminar. I would like to express my warmest thanks to the scientists and their assistants for the time and hard work they have dedicated to bringing about meaningful results. I also welcome all the participants of this seminar who are here to listen and, hopefully, to participate actively in the forthcoming discussions.

And with these expectations I declare the seminar officially opened.

► KRISTJÁN HJALTASON

Iceland and the German fish market 1950-1990: Did Germany get the fish it needed after the 200-mile extension?

My daily work is in marketing and service to the Icelandic fish export industry, a position which influences my approach to the subject. My background and link to Germany is that I came to Germany in 1984 and worked in Hamburg from 1986 on, marketing and selling seafood for the Icelandic Group until I moved back to Iceland in 1997. For me it has been of great interest to look back at the period before I came to Germany. In 1996 I successfully encouraged Mr. Hjalti Einarsson, who had been a director of the group for many decades, to research into and write about the activities of our company on the continent from the time of its foundation in 1942. Among the people he talked to were Hilda Peters, who provided valuable information. Mr. Einarsson's material served as important input for my own work, and I would hereby like to thank him for that.

The main questions I have tried to answer are:

Did German consumers get their seafood from Iceland after the German fleet had to leave the 200-mile area?

Did the extension pay off for Iceland (and Germany)?

The supply of seafood from Iceland to the German market

Fishing in Icelandic waters, 1950-1990

MT	1955	1970	1980	1990	2000
Icelanders	382.000	430.000	613.000	622.000	395.000
Foreigners	380.000	315.000	21.000	8.000	4.000
Total	762.000	745.000	634.000	630.000	399.000

Fig. 1 The catch of the main groundfish species in Icelandic waters, 1955-2000. (Source: MRI)

The figures for the catches of foreign countries in the past are surprisingly large. In 1955 foreign countries' catches of the main groundfish species (i.e. cod, saithe, haddock, redfish and Greenland halibut) amounted to over 380,000 MT around Iceland, corresponding to the volume caught by Iceland. In 1970 the total volume was similar but that accounted for by other countries had fallen to 315,000 MT while that of Icelanders rose to 430,000 MT. By 1980 the picture had of course changed considerably. Foreigners were catching only 21,000 MT while Icelanders were up to 613,000 MT. We now had our 200 miles and our fishing had increased by almost 50%. In 1990 foreign countries were catching virtually nothing in Icelandic waters, while Iceland was catching 622,000 MT. In 2001, Iceland was catching 400,000 MT of groundfish. This is a substantial decrease in comparison to 1990, representing a great disappointment. In comparison, however, it is still close to the volume being caught by foreign countries 45 years earlier.

These facts provide a background for my article and for the battle Iceland fought to gain control over fishing within the 200-miles zone.

I will be looking mainly at West Germany, due to the fact that the German fleet was entirely from the western part of the country after the Second World War. East Germany developed a deepsea fishing fleet in 1950-1960, but did not catch around Iceland. As far as I know, there was therefore never any dispute with East Germany over fishing rights.

Even though the period I will be covering extends from 1955 to 1990, my main focus will be on the years in which the changes took place, i.e. 1970-1990. I would like to start by looking at the chief groundfish species and seeing how the catch developed in this period.

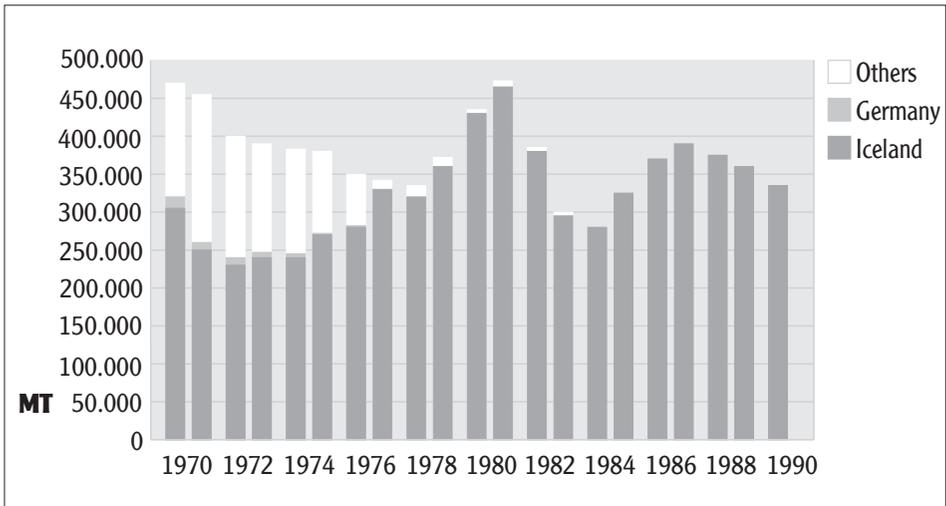


Fig. 2 Fishing of Cod in Icelandic Waters, 1970-1990

By far the most important species for Iceland was and is cod. The total catch has fluctuated considerably over the last half century. The volume throughout the first half of the period was much greater than it has been during the past 20 years or so. This is a great disappointment to Iceland and we cannot say that we are capable of catching what the foreign countries were catching before. The important objective of the 200-mile extension was not realised, but on the other hand there is no telling what would have happened if we had not gained control of our waters.

Redfish was the most important species for Germany. Rotbarsch, as it is called in German (Goldbarsch is another German term for it), has long been the most important fish for the Friday family dish. Before the war, Iceland used redfish only for fishmeal and fishoil production. The German fleet was catching approximately 30,000 MT around Iceland, much more than the Icelanders themselves. The German catch ended in 1977. It is interesting to see that Icelanders increased their catch after the extension and the total catch increased.

Saithe became known in Germany as Seelachs after a new product called "Seelachs in Oel" was developed with salted saithe as an imitation of smoked salmon. The original name was Köhler (in English saithe or coley). The German fleet caught considerable volumes of saithe around Iceland and took it home fresh (or salted?). Saithe is also popular for frying and served as an important raw material for the processing industry.

The German saithe catch amounted to 16,000 MT in 1970 but fell to 10,000 MT in 1977 with a peak in 1973 of 38,500 MT. The Icelandic saithe catch remained stable between 50-60,000 MT, but increased in 1988 and reached 95,000 MT in 1990.

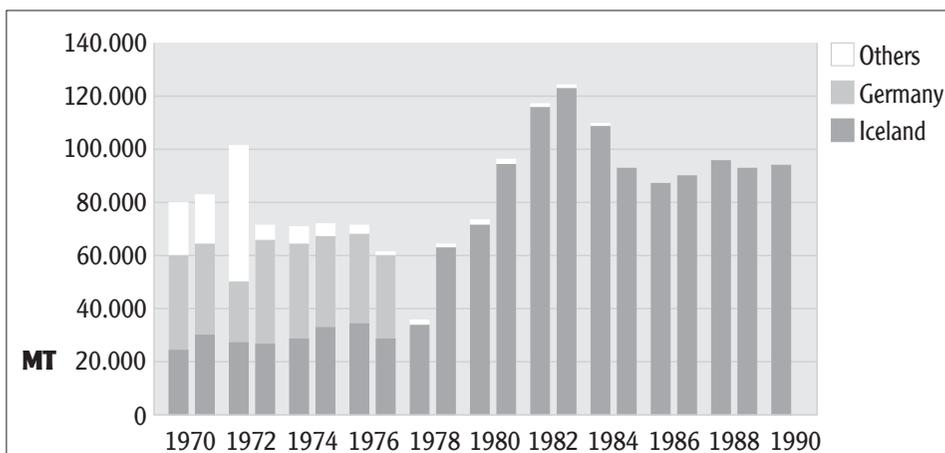


Fig. 3 Fishing of Redfish in Icelandic Waters, 1970-1990

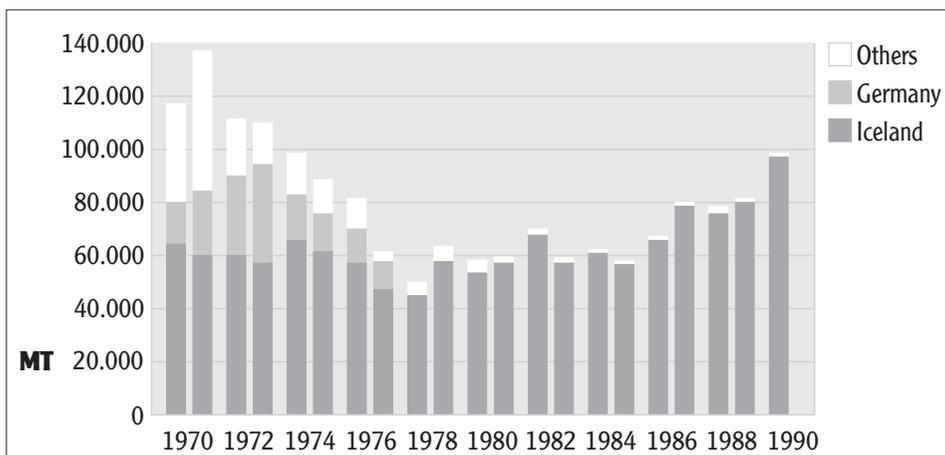


Fig. 4 Fishing of Saithe in Icelandic Waters, 1970-1990

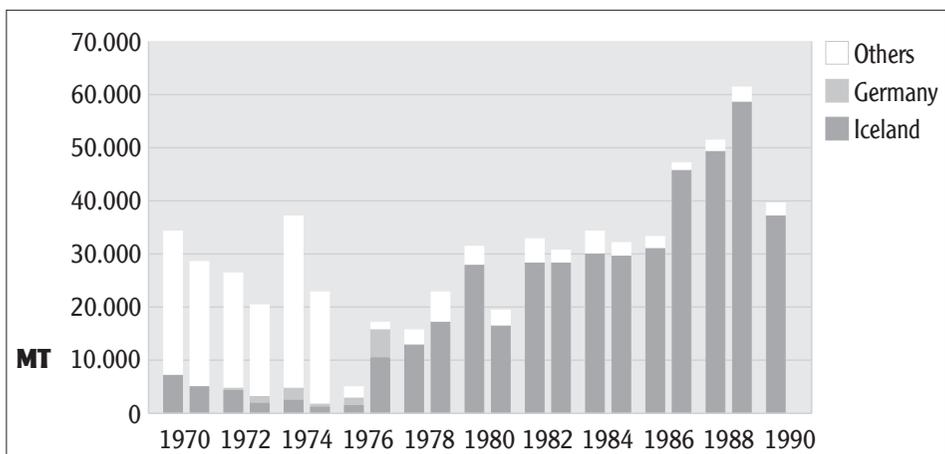


Fig. 5 Fishing of Greenland Halibut in Icelandic Waters, 1970-1990

Black halibut or Greenland halibut is a popular fish for smoking in Germany. Iceland was not catching much black halibut, and Germany only a limited volume, probably as a bycatch, but other countries had a larger black halibut catch. Beginning in 1978, the Icelandic black halibut catch increased considerably to approximately 30,000 MT.

Herring was an important species for Iceland, with a volume between 500 and 800,000 MT over many years. I could not find evidence of foreign countries catching any volume and taking it back home as Icelanders were doing for many years. As many of you know, herring was for a long time the most important species for the German market. But Iceland was not an important supplier and herring vessels were in operation primarily in Denmark.

The figures recorded by Iceland for the German catch did not match those recorded by Germany for its catch around Iceland. I have based my work primarily on figures from the Marine Research Institute and the Bureau of Statistics in Iceland.

Did the German consumers get their fish after the 200-mile extension?

This must have been the important question for the German market.

The main period of interest is that between 1970 and 1980, because it was then that the changes took place. I will try to answer the question by comparing the fishing carried out by the German fleet prior to 1976 and the export from Iceland to Germany over that period and later.

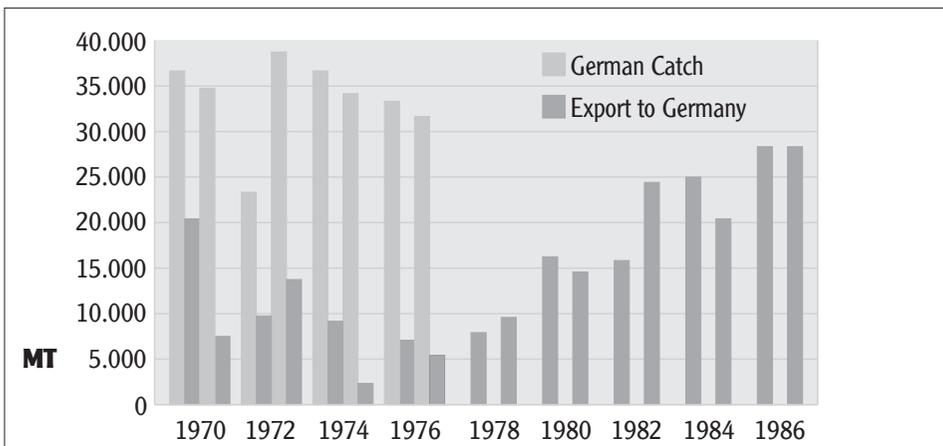


Fig. 6 The German Redfish catch around Iceland and the Redfish export from Iceland, 1970-1987

The main species sought by Germany was redfish or Rotbarsch as I mentioned earlier. Figure 6 shows the development from 1970 to 1987. Germany stopped catching in 1978, but until then export from Iceland to Germany had been moderate, amounting to approximately 5-10,000 MT. In the years that followed, there was a great increase and the figure – as far as I could ascertain – reached 25-30,000 MT in the late 1980s. On the basis of my own experience, I assume that it was more. In any case, it is less than the German fleet had been catching, the difference being explained by the fact that we were partly exporting fillets, which results in a lower figure but may correspond to a similar volume if calculated in terms of catch weight and – as I will show later – a part of the German catch went into fishmeal production. To an extent the redfish exports from Iceland to Germany were also used for this purpose, but on a much smaller scale. For human consumption the market required less volume.

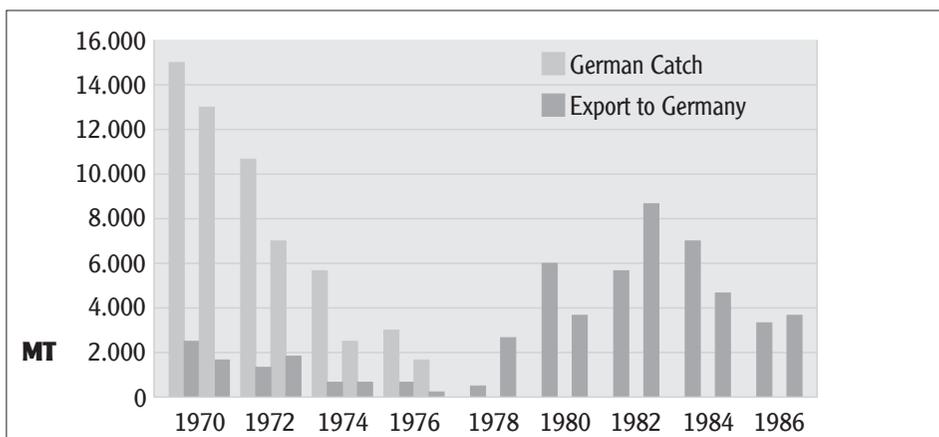


Fig. 7 The German Cod catch and the Cod export from Iceland to Germany, 1970-1987

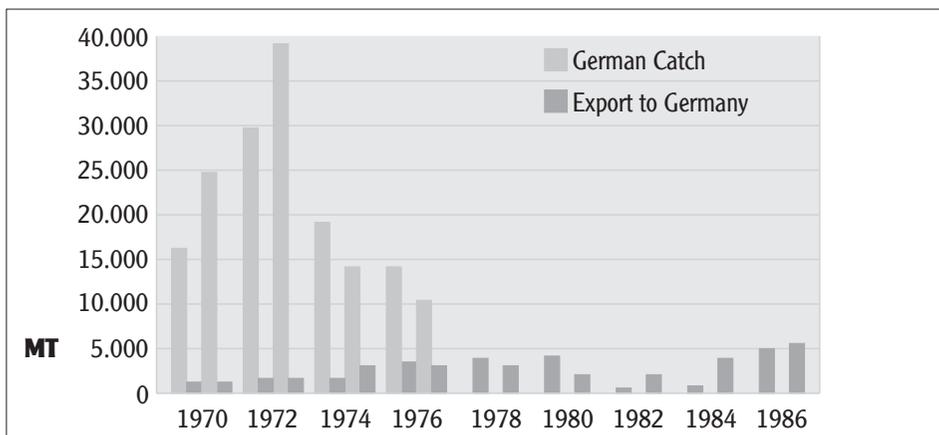


Fig. 8 The German Saithe catch and the Saithe export from Iceland to Germany, 1970-1987

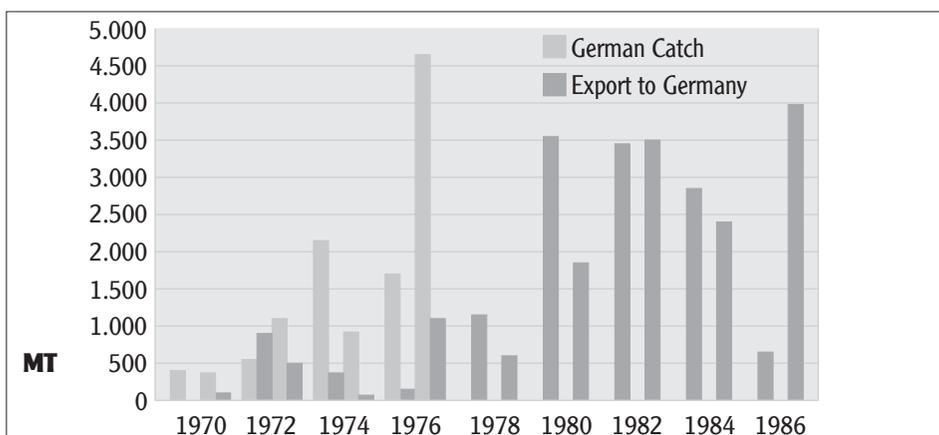


Fig. 9 The German Greenland Halibut catch and the Greenland Halibut export from Iceland to Germany, 1970-1987

I will not dwell long on other species. Cod export to Germany increased after the 200-mile extension and partially replaced the lost catch. The export volume of frozen and fresh saithe changed very little; salted as well as fresh saithe accounted for a good share. But the German fleet had to go somewhere else to get it, probably to the Faeroes and Norway. As we saw earlier, Iceland increased the catch of Greenland halibut considerably and an important market was Germany, as we see in Figure 9.

Iceland had redfish that the German market needed. Annual consumption amounted to approximately 60-70,000 MT in catch weight which yields approximately 20,000 MT of fillets. Greenland halibut was also of some importance. It seems that the German consumers still got their Friday fish, even if it was not being caught by German vessels.

We can see that Iceland changed from being a fishing ground for the German fleet to being a supplier of fish for the German processors and later for the German distributors of fish.

The export of seafood from Iceland in the period 1950-1990 and the situation today

I would now like to discuss the sale of seafood and the business between our two countries.

The Icelandic Group, or as it was called until recently, the Icelandic Freezing Plants Corp., was founded in 1942 by a group of producers of frozen fish. We were their marketing and sales division. Since we have no domestic market (or none worth mentioning), we always see the world as our domestic market.

The company founded a subsidiary in the USA in 1947, having previously begun attempting to sell on the European continent. Hjalti Einarsson founded a factory for our company in Kent near London in 1956 for the processing of various fish products including breaded and fried fish products.

In our annual report of 1950 the following is stated: "Fish prices in Germany are very low; the outlook for sales is not good and the fish sent there in early 1949 through the Marshall Plan was not all sold." It was clear that Germany had other priorities than the purchase of frozen fish from Iceland. The business did not look promising, but despite this circumstance our first office was in Hamburg from 1954 to 1956, when it moved to Prague. It has been said that the German market did not like frozen fish. The Germans had had bad experience with it. During the war Germany had had factories in Norway for freezing fish. By the time the products finally reached Germany, the temperature had fluctuated considerably, naturally influencing the quality greatly. This attitude was therefore also a hindrance for us.

It was also a fact that business with the Eastern European countries was easier through the contracts between the governments of each country. They exchanged goods. Price was therefore not the main issue and, strangely enough, the Soviet Union became an important market for Iceland.

Between 1960 and 1968 our company regularly sold frozen herring, cod blocks and other products to Germany. After 1970 business increased. We sold primarily to large importers such as Norda and Kratzenstein and processors like Nordsee. Iceland also had regular business with East Germany and sold fish to Fischimpex until 1990.

An office was opened in Hamburg again in 1981. Europe was becoming a more important market for us and Hamburg was a good place to restart business in Germany. The office was called Verkaufszentrale isländischer Kühllhäuser, which was a translation of our name in Icelandic, and sold to Germany, Denmark and many other countries. It is still operating with a turnover of around EUR 50m. Samband of Iceland – at that time our main competitor – had been selling sea-food for some time before; today that company is called SIF.

Germany has been an important market for Iceland: In 1995 it was the fifth most important market for Iceland in value and in 1999 the seventh, with a value of around USD 90m. Frozen fish

is the most important product group, followed by fresh fish. The drop has largely to do with the lower volume of redfish and saithe around Iceland since 1990.

The German Fish Market

Figure 10 depicts fish consumption in Germany from 1913 to 2001. The consumption grew steadily until 1990, then went through a period of decrease, and has recovered in the past years to reach 14 kg in 2001.

1913	5,0	1924	8,0	1925	8,0	1930	9,6	1946	10,9
1950	10,8	1970	11,2	1980	11,2	1989	13,6	1990	14,5
1991	14,3	1999	12,4	2000	13,7	2001	14,0		

Fig. 10 Fish Consumption in Germany, 1913 to 2001, kg/capita catch weight. (Source: SBA Wiesbaden, Fischwirtschaft in Zahlen, u.a.)

In volume, herring has been the most important species for the German consumers for a long time. Only in the last few years has Alaska pollack (which belongs to the cod family) overtaken herring in volume.

Division into product groups is a way of preserving the quality and freshness of the fish. After the war, canned seafood dominated the market, being a well known method of preserving food, but today chilling is now more popular than canning. Smoking was and is also popular. Fresh seafood accounted for a large share when the German fleet was catching large volumes of fish and the supply chain functioned well throughout Germany.

Fish Consumption 1961-1980 (kg/capita Prod. Wt.)

Products	1960	1970	1980
Canned	2,53	2,59	2,86
Fresh	2,01	1,12	1,00
Frozen	0,12	0,64	0,77
Smoked	0,36	0,36	0,30

Fig. 11 Fish Consumption in Germany 1960, 1970 and 1980 by Product Groups. (Source: BML, Jahresbericht über die Deutsche Fischwirtschaft)

Looking at the consumption for 1960, 1970 and 1980 as seen in Figure 11, we see that the main change is an increase in frozen and a decrease in fresh seafood. This is logical since the German fleet has no areas in the vicinity to fish in (and the North Sea is not in good shape). Today frozen has overtaken fresh.

An important aspect to discuss is the role of quality. I think I can say that, on the average, the quality of the seafood available to German consumers is higher than it was 30 years ago. Let us look at two examples:

The fresh fish trawlers remained near Iceland for three weeks before coming back to harbour. Even though the filleting took place within a short time after the return and the distribution throughout the country was very efficient, the quality fluctuated considerably. Today, in most cases, only the demanded volume and the right quality is imported.

The frozen fillet suffered from a poor image. Two reasons for that are probable. Firstly, as I mentioned earlier, the freezing chain was not good, the temperature fluctuated substantially on the way to the consumer, which had a negative influence on the quality. Secondly, the fish that was not sold by auction (in Bremerhaven, Cuxhaven or Hamburg), was filleted and frozen (or used to produce fish meal). This did not please the consumers. Today, the frozen fillets that consumers and chefs get are frozen at sea or shortly after landing in Iceland, the Faroes or Norway. The somewhat unpleasant smell with which many older Germans are familiar is gone.

The Seafood Industry in Iceland and Germany

I will now turn to the second part of my talk and look at the seafood industry in Germany and Iceland and how it has developed over the past decades.

MT Catch Mt.	1950	1953	1970	1980	1990	2001
German catch	525	708	612	318	247	239
Import	112	99	404	695	1.179	1.700
Supply	637	807	1.016	1.013	1.426	1.939
Fishmeal	85	176	117	45	3	0
Net supply	552	631	899	968	1.423	1.939
Export	6	24	222	280	505	789
Consumption	546	607	677	688	918	1.150
German catch			90%	38%	27%	21%

Fig. 12 The Supply of Seafood to the German Seafood Market.

Figure 12, showing the supply of seafood to the German market, is very interesting. The development since 1950 is clear. The domestic catch decreased between 1970 and 1980 and has remained around 240,000 MT. On the other hand, import has increased considerably, reaching 1.7 m MT last year. An important group is comprised by fishmeal and fishoil. In 1970 117,000 MT went to fishmeal, but it is used for animal feed. The main reasons are the poor quality of the raw material, – probably due to the long voyage from the catching grounds – or the lack of customers for it. Export grew from virtually nothing to nearly 800,000 MT in 2001. Even though Germany has to rely on imports for close to 80% of its supply, its processing industry is strong.

The German Seafood Industry

The German fishing industry today:

The deep-sea fishing fleet is small and companies are few:

- Mecklenburger Hochseefisherei in Rostock with only 3-4 vessels. This is what is left of the East German fleet of over 60 vessels prior to 1990, today owned by Parlevliet & Van den Plaas of Holland.
- Deutsche Fischfang Union of Cuxhaven is owned by FAB, which is owned by Samherji of Iceland and people close to it. They have 2-3 trawlers.
- Ocean Food with its vessel Atlantic Peace is in German hands.

Other German fishing activity is carried out by smaller vessels within German and EU waters.

This development is normal. The waters around Germany cannot support more fishing and the deep-sea fleet has to rely on quotas from far outside the 200-mile zone or where the EU has paid for quotas (e.g. Greenland).

Germany as a Processor and Exporter of Secondary Fish Products

Taking the different product groups into account, we can gain an impression of the seafood industry and distribution in Germany today.

Germany is a major secondary producer of frozen fish products, possessing the largest factories in the world in this area. Export has played an important role for these factories (as in general for the German industry). There are five large producers of frozen seafood. Their past is often in fish-

ing, but they have adapted to the changes by entering into processing and distribution. Ownership has changed and is today often in foreign hands.

- Frozen Fish International in Bremerhaven is a Unilever company (and has been for a long time) producing for the Iglo companies.
- Pickenpack in Lüneburg is owned by an investment company, which also owns Rahbekfish in Denmark.
- In Wilhelmshaven, the Jade Kost plant built during the upturn in 1990 is owned by Royal Greenland.
- Frosta in Bremerhaven is an AG, still owned by to a large extent by Ahlers.
- Hussman & Hahn in Cuxhaven is owned by FAB, which is partly owned by the Samherji Group of Iceland.

Smoking is carried out locally to a large extent, the exception being salmon, for which Germany depends strongly on imports.

Canning has been strong in Germany, though it has fallen in popularity as chilled products, especially chilled herring, have increased in popularity. Poland is an important supplier of ready-to-eat products.

The share of fresh fish has decreased, but is still important for the catering industry and traditional fish shops. Germany has adapted to changes in import and reduced its own filleting, now importing the fillets from places of origin all over the world. Major seafood companies in Germany are:

- Nordsee, the leading brand in fresh fish and specialised fish restaurants. They compete with McDonald's in fast food.
- Deutsche See, formerly a part of Nordsee, is the leading catering company in Germany.

Today the development is at a point where it is possible to buy frozen fillets at a competitive price at Aldi or Lidl, where the home-service market is strong and consumption outside the home has been growing, e.g. in canteens and restaurants.

The Seafood Industry in Iceland

Fishing

Iceland has a strong fisheries management system. It is based on a quota system established in 1989. Scientists annually submit their proposals for twelve species and in most cases the Minister of Fisheries complies with these proposals. The quotas apply to vessels and are individually transferable between vessels. Today the ten largest companies own 46% of the quota and the scene is dominated by mergers and takeovers. The latest change is that, beginning in 2004, quota owners must pay a fishing charge for their share of this natural resource.

Processing

There is a large primary processing industry in Iceland. Over half of the production is frozen, both on land and at sea. Salting is still important and the fishmeal industry is significant. The production of fresh fillets that are flown all over the world to restaurants and shops is a growing industry.

Marketing and production abroad

Strong export companies dominate the marketing:

- SIF has a turnover of more than USD 600m. It is active in chilled, frozen, salted and fresh seafood. It has factories for the secondary processing of chilled, frozen and smoked seafood in France and the US, sales companies in the UK, Spain, South America, Asia and Iceland.

- Icelandic Group. Turnover was around USD 550m in 2001. Main focus is on frozen seafood, but has taken up the production of chilled seafood in the UK. Has factories for secondary processing in the UK and US, sales and distribution companies in Spain, France, Germany, Norway and Japan.
- Bakkavör. Turnover of USD 200m. Main focus is on chilled and preserved food. It has grown substantially in the past five years; its biggest operation is in the UK, but activities in Scandinavia, Iceland, Germany, France and Chile as well.
- Samherji. The biggest fish company in Iceland. Main focus is on primary processing, but has activities in Germany (DFFU and H&H), UK (Onward Fishing), the Faroes and elsewhere.

Did it Pay Off for Iceland to Get the 200 Miles?

At the end of the 19th century Iceland possessed only small boats; we watched foreign trawlers fish real volume outside our fishing zone. Around 1900 Iceland bought their first trawlers and with them came the industrial revolution and many changes for the country. Foreigners continued to catch huge volumes until 1976, when we gained control over our waters. The volume caught by foreigners today is very small. Iceland is dependent on what the ocean gives us and we need to control our own waters.

An extremely important factor for us today is fishery management. Fish stocks need to be managed on the basis of sustainability so that future generations are able to utilize them also. This would not have been possible without the extension of the fishing zone to 200 miles.

Iceland has specialized in the primary production of seafood, Germany in secondary production and distribution based largely on imported raw material. This is, to my mind, a very natural development and I am sure that the development would have taken this course even if we had not extended the fishing area to 200 miles. The development has been natural and good for both countries; both have specialised in areas where their strengths lie. That should ultimately be in the best interest of the consumers.

Main sources:

Bureau of Statistics in Iceland
 Marine Research Institute Iceland
 Mrs. Hilda Peters, Bremerhaven, Germany
 Mr. Hjalti Einarsson, Garðabær, Iceland
 Various official reports from Germany

► GUDNI TH. JÓHANNESSON

Did he matter? The Colourful Andrew Gilchrist and the first Cod War between Britain and Iceland, 1958-61

Introduction

This paper is inspired by one of the grand debates in history – the role of individuals in the course of events. At the risk of gross oversimplification we have the preference for “structure” on the one hand and “contingency” or “chance” on the other.¹ The actions of Andrew Gilchrist, Britain’s Ambassador in Reykjavík at the beginning of the first “cod war” between Iceland and Britain in 1958, will be used here almost as a case study into the conflict between ‘structure’ and ‘chance.’ What difference, if any, did he make? Would not all have happened more or less as it did, regardless of his conduct? While this analysis is certainly not as sweeping as, say, an examination of the importance of Hitler or Stalin in the greater scheme of things, it is likelier to yield more concrete results for the following reasons:

- The ‘cod war,’ a dispute over fishing limits off Iceland which led to skirmishes between Icelandic gunboats and British trawlers and warships, was a comparatively small episode where, presumably, the effects of individuals are relatively easy to weigh and measure.
- Even so, there were also obvious underlying causes which made a conflict of some kind likely, regardless of the actions and behaviour of individuals in the short term.
- In Reykjavík, Andrew Gilchrist was an energetic servant of the Crown, while statesmen and officials in London usually had little interest in, or knowledge of, the dispute. Thus, he would seem to have been in a good position to influence the events.
- Icelandic observers have harshly criticised Gilchrist for his conduct during the dispute, blaming him for ‘arrogance’ and a total misunderstanding of political realities in Iceland. Allegedly, this had unfortunate effects on decision-making in London.²
- Two further ‘cod wars,’ which were akin to the first dispute in a number of basic ways, occurred when Gilchrist was not at all involved. We have what is virtually a historical ‘laboratory’ scenario, therefore, allowing us to compare the course of events with and without the interventions of the energetic Ambassador.

“Structure”: The Origins of a Fishing Dispute

The underlying origins of the ‘cod war’ can be traced to the 19th century when Britain was the undisputed master of the high seas and the narrow three-mile rule of territorial waters was an important tenet of British supremacy. Around 1890, British trawlers began to work the rich fishing grounds around Iceland and in 1901, the authorities in Copenhagen, which then ruled the island, signed a treaty with London on that limit off its shores. In 1944, the Icelanders gained full independence from Denmark and soon began the quest for control over fish stocks in their adjacent waters, sincerely worried about overfishing, totally reliant on fishing for exports and encour-

raged by the fact that the law of the sea was developing in favour of coastal states. In 1949, the three-mile treaty was denounced and in two steps – in 1950 and 1952 – the Icelandic fishing zone was extended from three to four miles, and encompassed the wide bays and fjords of Iceland.³

The British trawling industry was furious and imposed a ban on the landings of iced fish which the Icelanders brought to British ports. This coercion certainly had the potential to hurt Iceland, which relied to a large degree on that market. London was not directly involved but hoped that the embargo would break the authorities in Reykjavík.⁴ Although officials admitted in private that the sanctions probably contravened Britain's treaty obligations and domestic laws on 'criminal conspiracy',⁵ acceptance of the Icelandic action was impossible for closely connected reasons which can be called the five 'p's' of pressure, prestige, principle, precedence and power:

First, the British distant-water trawling industry was an effective pressure group which wielded considerable power in the Fisheries Departments in Whitehall.⁶ Secondly, Britain's prestige was involved. How could a great naval power tolerate a clear infringement of its perceived fundamental interests? Thirdly, the general principle of narrow territorial waters would be weakened by acquiescence off Iceland.⁷ Fourthly, the danger of negative precedence, especially in the North Atlantic, was ever present. It was imperative, as one worried official noted in the Foreign Office, to 'prevent the infection spreading to the Faroes and Greenland.'⁸ Finally, the apparent presence of superior power made it inherently tempting to use it.

The ban bit at first but the Icelanders quickly found alternative outlets for their fish, not least in the Soviet Union which, by signing a huge oil-for-fish agreement with Iceland in 1953, decided to play on an emerging problem within the NATO.⁹ The country was a founding member of the alliance and the US military base at Keflavik was deemed invaluable for western defences in the North Atlantic. Moscow-oriented socialists also polled a fifth of the vote in elections, however, and neutralist tendencies were strong. Hence, the eastward orientation caused great concern in Washington, and the United States put pressure on Britain to have the ban removed.¹⁰

Direct and indirect support from the world's superpowers proved stronger than intimidation in British ports. The coercion no longer worked, but what could then be done? Could London ignore pressure, accept slight to prestige, abandon a cherished principle and set a dangerous precedent? The question, however, could be put differently: What could be done but face the facts? The plain truth was that Iceland's pieces of power added up to more than Britain's. In 1955, Whitehall officials reacted to reports from Reykjavík about the possibility of further extensions by concluding that British trawlers should then be offered naval protection.¹¹ '[O]nly by using force at some stage,' said one of them, 'will we ever bring the Icelanders to accept a compromise settlement.'¹² Things were heating up.

The currents which went back to the 19th century, coupled with more recent developments after the Second World War, thus explain why a serious fishing dispute between Britain and Iceland was likely to break out. We realise, in other words, how a conflict came. It is a different task now to recount how *the 'cod war'* of 1958 broke out and it is here that Andrew Gilchrist enters the scene.

“What about Andrew Gilchrist?” An Eager Diplomat is Promoted to Iceland

In the early 1950s, two Ministers served in the British Legation in Reykjavík. First, the 'light-weight' John Dee Greenway had been given Iceland as his last post before retirement.¹³ Although an intelligent man, he was far from industrious and as the dispute over the fishing limit was simmering, both the Icelanders and foreign diplomats in Reykjavík wondered why Britain kept such a 'weak' man there.¹⁴ When Greenway belatedly concerned himself with the conflict, he sided completely with the Icelanders, much to the chagrin of officials in Whitehall. The Minister was

sidelined and could only resort to marking Foreign Office telegrams about the rigid British stance with such expressions as ‘pooh!’ ‘why?’ and ‘!!!’¹⁵

In early 1953, Greenway was replaced by James Thyne Henderson, a man of a slightly higher standing in the Diplomatic Service who was, as he put it himself, hurried off to Reykjavík to ‘do something.’¹⁶ He had clearly been briefed about the need to stand up to the Icelanders and did so at first, but soon came to call for acquiescence to their wishes. The new Minister had no sympathy for the Icelandic cause but grudgingly admitted that the correlation of power in the conflict would ultimately benefit Iceland.¹⁷ Henderson never said so to the Icelanders, however, and they in turn disliked his apparent obstinacy and toughness.¹⁸ Moreover, the recommendations from Reykjavík were not welcomed in London. ‘Mr. Henderson seems to argue,’ one official complained, ‘that because the Icelanders are not prepared to yield we must at all costs get the problem settled at this end.’¹⁹

As with Greenway, Henderson underestimated the constraints on British decision-making and both of them may also have suffered from ‘localitis,’ the tendency of some diplomats to sympathise overly much with the views of their host country.²⁰ But most importantly, Greenway’s and Henderson’s correct estimates of the options open did not jibe with the prevalent perceptions and prejudices in London. It is indeed tempting to view Whitehall discussions on Iceland as a symptom of ‘groupthink,’ the established concept in decision-making theory which is used to describe a group’s thinking ‘when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.’²¹ Admittedly, government ministers and officials often argued about what to do but they all agreed that the new Icelandic regulations could not be accepted. The ‘group’ that Whitehall represented disregarded negative input and had no place for unconventional thinking.²²

Would Andrew Gilchrist conform more to the customary outlook in London? He was born in 1910, entered the old British colonial service in 1933, and was based in Bangkok when Japan entered the Second World War in 1941. Gilchrist was interned for eight months but then released. Three years later he joined the Special Operations Executive and saw active service in India. After the war he reapplied to join the Foreign Office and served in consular posts in Bangkok, Stuttgart and Singapore before arriving in Iceland in the late summer of 1956.²³ By then, a left-wing coalition had come to power in Iceland, not only committed to another extension of the fishing limit but ostensibly determined to expel the Americans from the island. The removal of the landing ban had become more urgent than ever before.²⁴ Iceland was a promotion for the relatively young diplomat who was not in line to be in charge of a mission.²⁵ Apparently, Gilchrist was sent to Reykjavík because at least two more senior diplomats had rejected the offer. ‘What about Andrew Gilchrist?’ an exasperated figure on the Foreign Office Selection Board is said to have queried, remembering that he was a keen angler so surely he knew a fair bit about fish. And had he not specialised in communism when he was Consul General in Stuttgart in the early 1950s?²⁶ The post was Gilchrist’s – a historical ‘chance’ indeed.

“You do not fully accept the views on the local situation.” Gilchrist Learns the Realities of Reporting from Reykjavík

The new minister’s first impressions of Reykjavík consisted of verbal abuse which teenagers hurled at British sailors on land leave.²⁷ Notwithstanding his anger over such treatment, he immediately understood that the ineffectual landing ban had to go. There was nothing ‘humiliating’ about a graceful defeat, Gilchrist emphasised in October 1956: ‘Surely the humiliation lies in the regrettable but total failure of our big stick, not in the acknowledgement of failure in a gentlemanly way.’²⁸



Andrew Gilchrist, Minister and Ambassador to Iceland, 1956–59. Gilchrist later received a knighthood and wrote a book on his stay in Iceland, called “Cod Wars and How to Lose Them.” (Brain Holt Photograph Collection, Reykjavík)

Two years earlier, low-key negotiations on an end to the sanctions had begun in Paris, under the auspices of OEEC, the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation. In early 1956, they had almost succeeded but domestic complications in Iceland and Britain prevented a solution. The trawler-owners, de facto spokesmen of the industry, had a ‘veto’ on any proposal as one member of the Foreign Office privately admitted.²⁹ By fall, they still showed a reluctance to lift the embargo unless Iceland pledged not to extend the limit again for some specified period. That would never happen and Gilchrist was appalled when he read reports of the stalemate, wanting to tell the concerned officials in London that he did not ‘see or sense anything to indicate that you told the trawler-owners straight out that the maintenance of the ban was contrary to the interests of Her Majesty’s Government.’ He decided not to send these thoughts but still wondered to himself why his advice had not been heeded:

- a) You do not fully accept the views on the local situation which I have been putting forward from Reykjavík.
- b) There are wider factors with which I am unacquainted.
- c) The trawler-owners are too tough to be subject to Foreign Office influence.³⁰

Gilchrist was finding out the lot of a low-ranking diplomat in a marginal outpost: He was neither listened to nor let in on much. In November 1956 the ban was finally lifted after the owners realised that the Icelanders would not grant them the guarantee they were after and that the British authorities had grown very irritated over their intransigence. Afterwards, Gilchrist tried to claim much more credit for the settlement than was his due, quoting the Foreign Minister of Iceland, Guðmundur Í. Guðmundsson, as saying that the dispute was ‘not settled in Paris. It could never have been settled in Paris. It was settled here, in Reykjavík, by you and me.’³¹ This exaggeration was characteristic of a proud and aspiring envoy who wanted to make a difference. He hardly had anything to do with the final result and the frustration at the time was more accurate. On the other hand, Gilchrist had quickly gained a good knowledge of Icelandic realities. Already in the fall of 1956 he was warning that ‘we may be in for more trouble on limits sooner or later—I have never expected anything else.’³² Again, however, he was to find out that his words fell on deaf ears in London.

“I would quite like to see ... what our line is likely to be.” Gilchrist and the Geneva Conference, February–April, 1958

In 1957, the Icelandic government decided to postpone any action on the fishing limit until the international community had discussed the issue. In February 1958, the first United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea began in Geneva and for Britain the occasion provided an opportunity, apart from the general prospect of a world-wide agreement on territorial waters, to establish a lasting settlement off Iceland. On the eve of the conference, Gilchrist (now an ambas-

sador after the upgrade of the British and Icelandic missions in Reykjavík and London) accurately predicted that '[t]he only place where a bridge can be built is at Geneva. If we don't build a bridge, we shall be confronted with unilateral extensions, as sure as eggs is eggs.'³³

International currents had continued to flow in Iceland's favour. Some South American states wanted national jurisdiction to as many as 200 miles, the communist bloc advocated twelve-mile territorial waters and many newly independent nations considered narrow limits a colonial tool to continue exploitation of their resources.³⁴ In late 1957, Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice, Senior Legal Adviser in the Foreign Office, warned that the three-mile rule would never be ratified at the conference. The Fisheries Departments seemed willing to accept a six-mile compromise but the Admiralty and the Chiefs of Staff insisted that Britain must maintain the three-mile limit, or at least the rights for overflying and innocent passage up to that line.³⁵

Gilchrist heard little of the ongoing debates in Whitehall about the British stance. 'I would quite like to see an occasional bit of paper on what our line is likely to be at the conference,' he meekly complained at one stage and got most of his information about developments at Geneva from Icelandic newspapers.³⁶ As expected, the event went badly for Britain. Canada offered the most realistic compromise, a three-mile territorial sea with an additional nine-mile exclusive fisheries zone. The British delegation stuck to the old three-mile rule, however, and only reluctantly offered an alternative late in the day: six-mile territorial waters with certain maritime rights up to three miles from shore. This was not bridge-building. From Reykjavík, Gilchrist suggested that Britain should instead accept the Canadian proposal – if the Icelanders declared that while they were determined to assert their right over twelve miles, they would respect the interests of other states and only extend to six miles for a trial period of two years or so. He added that even this offer might well fail to placate the Icelandic authorities.³⁷ Too much water had already flowed under the (non-existent) bridge.

Andrew Gilchrist accepted that the Icelandic point of view could not determine general policy on territorial waters. He did his duty to accurately judge the mood in Iceland and his formula was in fact very similar to the deal which Britain accepted in 1961, after a bitter 'cod war.' The problem was not that he was ahead of his time, but that British policy-makers lagged behind, pulled back by the five 'p's' of pressure, prestige, principle, precedence and power.

International unity proved impossible at Geneva. On April 27, the conference ended in failure as far as the width of territorial waters was concerned, and in London the self-criticism immediately began. 'The three-mile limit is a dead duck,' one official asserted a few weeks later and Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice pointed out that the six-mile offer, the main element in Britain's battle plan, had always been a 'non-starter.'³⁸ In legal literature, the British performance during the conference has been cited to support the contention that 'the lesson of the Sibylline books is to accept the possible when it is still timely.'³⁹ The conservatism at Geneva is also a small example of a greater theme in Britain's post-war history: the reluctance to adapt swiftly to changed interests and capabilities.⁴⁰ It was small wonder, therefore, that an inexperienced Ambassador in tiny Iceland could do nothing about it.

"I hope if we threaten we can perform." Gilchrist and the Decision to Use Force

After the failure at Geneva, a conflict was almost inevitable, as Gilchrist had correctly noted. Within the Icelandic government, the communist/socialist People's Alliance demanded an immediate extension to twelve miles. Although the centre-left parties in the coalition – the Social Democrats and the Progressive Party – wanted to leave scope for talks with Britain and perhaps temporary concessions, they would also insist on some recognition of a twelve-mile limit. The same went for the right-wing Independence Party in opposition.⁴¹

What could then be done? Back in 1955, naval protection had of course been suggested in Whitehall but the prospect of implementation had not been as real at that time. And on closer look, the use or threat of force against an ally in the NATO seemed out of the question. 'I don't suppose for a moment that Her Majesty's Government will try such a policy,' Gilchrist maintained in early 1957.⁴² About a year later, Thomas Brimelow in the Northern Department of the Foreign Office also argued against the involvement of the Royal Navy in a struggle against the Icelanders.⁴³

Despite the dismissal of firm action, Gilchrist had certainly not become a great supporter of the rulers in Reykjavík and when Icelandic newspapers carried reports on British declarations at Geneva about the determination to defend the three-mile rule, he was incredulous, but pleased. 'Are we really making official threats?' he telegraphed to London in mid-April: 'I hope if we threaten we can perform. Nothing would please me better.'⁴⁴ The Foreign Office quickly pointed out that the news from Geneva was exaggerated and on reflection, Gilchrist was to add that he simply could not see the United States 'allowing' Britain to apply coercion against a country where it had such important strategic interests.⁴⁵ After all, the American administration had forced Britain to back down over Suez two years earlier. Furthermore, Gilchrist's almost juvenile joy over the prospect of British boldness highlights how little he was involved in British decision-making. It also turned out that his disbelief was unfounded. On May 12, despite the obvious geopolitical disadvantages, the Foreign Office recommended that if the Icelandic fishing limit was extended the Royal Navy would sail to the disputed waters to protect British trawlers from harassment by Icelandic gunboats.⁴⁶

Never did Gilchrist's opinions or despatches figure largely in the reaching of that conclusion in the Foreign Office. On May 12, the day of the final decision there, he even wrote that 'the arguments against the warlike action I presume to be still far too strong.'⁴⁷ And it must have galled the ambitious Ambassador when Sir Paul Gore-Booth, a senior official in the Foreign Office, wrote later in the month that although his 'vivid' despatches were appreciated, would he 'constantly bear in mind number and magnitude of urgent problems confronting us at present and keep telegrams to minimum number and length.'⁴⁸ At the highest levels, there was little time to examine a particular predicament in every detail.⁴⁹ Vague knowledge and preconceptions had to suffice, coupled with self-interested appeals from domestic pressure groups. The advice of the most knowledgeable officials was ignored, or even berated. In the Foreign Office, for instance, Brimelow never liked the possible application of an old-fashioned 'gunboat diplomacy' off Iceland.⁵⁰ So Gilchrist alone was not overlooked. It was more the rule than the exception, more 'structure' than 'chance.'

On May 24, the government in Reykjavík announced that on September 1 the fishing limit would be extended to twelve miles. In response, the British authorities publicly declared on June 3 that they would not recognise the act and send warships to protect British vessels 'on the high seas.'⁵¹ Britain was going to perform and Gilchrist was pleased. But the decision was definitely not his.

"The Prime Minister says that I have misled him." Gilchrist and the Immediate Causes of the "Cod War"

Andrew Gilchrist indisputably possessed a combative character. '[N]o one ever doubted Gilchrist's courage,' a colleague later said.⁵² But he was 'rude' and 'arrogant,' in the words of an Icelandic official who was based in the London Embassy during the conflict.⁵³ Ólafur Thors, the leader of the Independence Party – both the largest and most pro-Western in Iceland – also developed a special dislike for 'that idiot' Andrew Gilchrist.⁵⁴ Others have spoken fondly of Gilchrist

and, generally speaking, he certainly liked and admired the Icelandic people.⁵⁵ Yet he was often provocative and controversial. 'He wears an Edward VII beard and ... dresses in the tweediest of tweeds,' said the Canadian Ambassador to Iceland after a visit to the country. 'He is a most entertaining conversationalist but perhaps a little too fond of the well-turned phrase to please the rather stolid Icelanders.'⁵⁶ Gilchrist would tell British journalists who visited Iceland that all fishermen were born liars, and he deliberately encouraged the falsehood that the coast guard vessels would unhesitatingly open fire on British trawlers within the twelve-mile limit!⁵⁷ But did it matter? Thors, for example, had led the four-mile fight in the early 1950s and was always determined to extend the limits further. He was not egged on by Gilchrist's disposition. In the trawling ports in Britain, rumours about trigger-happy Icelanders were rife and would have been so even if he had remained silent.

What about the claim that Gilchrist sent erroneous reports from Reykjavík? First of all, he is alleged to have recommended strong-hand tactics which would compel the Icelanders to back down.⁵⁸ Again, it may be recalled that Gilchrist found it hard to believe that Britain would or could threaten the use of force off Iceland and when such a decision was made he was nowhere near. Furthermore, in the months between Geneva and the 'cod war' in September, he vacillated between belligerence and benevolence. For instance, he again suggested a de facto compromise whereby Iceland would declare a twelve-mile limit but allow traditional fishing nations to work up to six miles for the next four years – a solution much on the lines of the 'cod war' settlement in 1961.⁵⁹ Conversely, his aggressive ideas, which will be discussed later, were usually so wild and impractical that they were never taken seriously in London.

Another charge against Gilchrist is that he misread the political situation in Iceland. He is said to have maintained that the drive for extended fishing limits was a communist ploy and that if only the People's Alliance would be kicked out of government and the Independents assumed power, an amicable solution would be found.⁶⁰ This is wrong. 'On fishery limits no Icelander is our friend,' Gilchrist underlined at the end of the Geneva conference, and in early August he emphasised that no political party in Iceland was willing to actually withdraw the twelve-mile decree of May.⁶¹ In fact, those who mainly fanned the hopes of a happy ending in the summer of 1958 were Icelandic politicians and officials. The Foreign Minister, the Social Democrat Gudmundsson, strove for the collapse of the coalition, co-operation with the Independence Party and negotiations within the NATO on temporary concessions within the twelve-mile limit, and Hans G. Andersen, Iceland's permanent representative at the Alliance's headquarters in Paris, clearly disliked his government's intransigence.⁶² In late August, when the moment of truth was only days away and a fleet of four British warships was ready to sail for Iceland, Andersen indicated that a compromise on an initial six-mile extension was not out of the question.⁶³ A peace treaty of sorts was hammered out in Paris and hopes were raised in London. But they were quickly thwarted. After a meeting with Gudmundsson on August 28, Gilchrist telegraphed to the Foreign Office: 'I think we are in a mess. The Minister for Foreign Affairs says quite specifically that [the] text is unacceptable as it stands, and that it is not at all in accordance with his instructions to Hans Andersen.'⁶⁴ This news caused deep disappointment in London. Royal Navy warships would now be pitted against the diminutive Icelandic gunboats. Fortuitously, a final ray of hope appeared on August 31 when Gilchrist could ascertain in Reykjavík that if a trawler refused to obey coast guard orders inside twelve miles and immediately appealed for naval assistance, 'no boarding attempt will be made.'⁶⁵ This analysis must have pleased Macmillan. His battle plan at this late stage seemed to involve a robust but fair establishment of British rights with the option of a dignified retreat towards the last compromise proposal from Paris.⁶⁶

This was not to happen. On September 1, the twelve-mile regulation took effect in Iceland and on the following morning the gunboats repeatedly attempted to arrest British trawlers, ignoring directives from Reykjavík about initial caution. Sailors removed an Icelandic party from one ves-

sel and trawlermen on another used boathooks, rope-ends and the like to thwart another boarding attempt. A wave of fury swept over Iceland. All chances of a compromise were gone for good, it seemed.⁶⁷ How could this have happened? '[W]e are already reaping around Iceland the consequences of the orthodox legal doctrine which we upheld at Geneva,' the able Thomas Brimelow pointed out.⁶⁸ In other words, 'structural' reasons lay behind the virtually inevitable clash. It is true, nonetheless, that – while a conflict was almost bound to happen – in the late summer of 1958 individuals were determining how exactly it came about. And Macmillan blamed Gilchrist. 'The Prime Minister says that I have misled him,' the Ambassador said in October when the impasse was complete.⁶⁹ But Gilchrist had been misled just as much as Macmillan. Gilchrist had always warned that talks with the Icelanders, including the probing in Paris, could well prove useless and he could not be expected to foresee that, once the standoff in the disputed waters had begun, the coast guard captains would almost immediately interpret their orders very freely. And to reiterate, Gilchrist was not a main mover. In early August, he privately complained about the 'nonsense which the Foreign Office and our people in Paris had cooked up for me.'⁷⁰ Similarly, at the end of the month he wondered, clearly bitten by bad experience, if he should bother to arrange a meeting with the Icelandic Prime Minister and send home a report on it: 'For the record, who would read it?'⁷¹

Macmillan's unfair criticism could have had unfortunate consequences for Gilchrist's career. Then again, the ambitious Ambassador did himself no good by what was to follow, his most infamous act in Iceland. It was almost bound to end badly, for it involved the curious but volatile mixture of Gilchrist's impetuous temperament, Icelandic nationalism, drunken teenagers, Scottish bagpipes and journalistic craving for hot news.

"For God's sake, Ambassador, don't provoke the people." Gilchrist's Fateful Moment of Fame in Reykjavík

At noon on September 2, Reykjavík radio reported on the skirmishes which had occurred that morning between the coast guard and British trawlers and warships off Iceland. Word immediately spread that in the evening a demonstration would take place outside the British Ambassador's residence. Instead of lying low, Gilchrist now felt that he had been given a good opportunity to show the world the brutality of the communist-led Icelanders, thus countering the propaganda that they were poor, innocent fishermen who were being bullied by Britain. He threw a dinner party and invited a select group of foreign journalists who had flocked to Iceland but – apart from the lucky ones near the scenes at sea – were still desperately short of 'hard news.' While Gilchrist was excited, Peter Kidson, another member of the British Embassy, feared the worst. 'For God's sake, Ambassador, don't provoke the people,' he pleaded in the afternoon, to no avail. 'I will not be careful!' the Ambassador reportedly insisted.⁷²

By dusk, a crowd of a few hundred (some said up to a thousand) had gathered in front of the residence. But the people were disappointingly timid and Eddie Gilmore, the eminent American reporter, is to have complained: 'Mr. Ambassador, there ain't no action! Looks like you brought us here under false pretences. No goddam headlines for A.P. out of this serenade.' Gilchrist had to take the initiative. Within a minute, the Edinburgh City Police Pipe Band were playing full blast on the house gramophone *The Barren Rocks of Aden*.⁷³ The protesters felt grossly provoked. Some entered the house garden and many windows were broken, amid shouts that 'Vikings never give up!' This, however, was not a real riot with great significance for the British cause, as Gilchrist had hoped. 'Often the jeering struck me as half-hearted,' one of the journalists reported, 'and no real violence was attempted by the crowd, which for the most part was composed of very young people, many of them drunk.'⁷⁴ Another contention by Gilchrist, that the

communists were the driving force in the protests, was also incorrect. The most pro-Western of people were present and the People's Alliance actually deplored the episode, as did the other political parties.⁷⁵

After the outbreak of the 'cod war' and Gilchrist's provocative behaviour, he became something of a persona non grata in Reykjavík. He was not invited to government functions and most politicians shunned his company.⁷⁶ '[N]o politician could risk his future in being seen with him,' the Canadian Ambassador to Iceland remarked after a visit to the country.⁷⁷ Thus, Gilchrist had reduced what little capability he had to influence events. He made a bad situation worse and there are some indications that it did harm his career prospects. In the summer of 1959, he privately remarked in Reykjavík that 'the younger set in the Foreign Office' wanted him to retain his post until the 'cod war' had been brought to a close, whereas the 'seniors appeared to be against him and wanted a change.'⁷⁸ In his memoirs on the Icelandic assignment, Gilchrist also noted somewhat ruefully that 'Ministers – on whom in the end my promotion depended – were led to regard me as some sort of Caledonian madman who went round in a kilt playing the bagpipes under a hail of bricks.'⁷⁹ At the end of 1959, Gilchrist left Reykjavík and became a Consul General in Chicago.

Icelandic observers, both then and later, have tended to view this move as a 'demotion,' or even a 'clear humiliation.'⁸⁰ This is not true. First of all, Gilchrist was so proud that he indicated that when Britain accepted defeat in the dispute with Iceland, he would rather be somewhere else.⁸¹ Furthermore, the posts in Chicago and Reykjavík were of equal rank in the British Foreign Service. It is true that Gilchrist no longer held the post of Ambassador, but he had not arrived as one in Reykjavík and that assignment was clearly an elevation for him. On balance, it is fair to say that after his tumultuous stay in Reykjavík, Gilchrist was neither promoted nor demoted. After Chicago, however, he became Ambassador to Indonesia, a significant post indeed, and he then ended his career as Ambassador to the Republic of Ireland, always a prestigious position. In short, few, if any, of Britain's representatives in Reykjavík have reached as high a post in the British Foreign Service as Sir Andrew Gilchrist, despite his antics in the first days of the 'cod war' in 1958.

“We ought not be deterred by fear of a little bloodshed on the way.” Gilchrist's Suggested “Solutions” to the “Cod War”

Finally, it may be wondered what would have happened if Gilchrist had been able to determine British policy. At times, his boldness, ambition and pride clouded his judgement and led him to suggest the most unrealistic and provocative policies. In May 1958, when the British Cabinet was deciding on naval protection, unbeknownst to the Ambassador in Reykjavík, he suggested that 'we should catch an Icelandic gunboat in the act, disable her by non-violent means, (query: shoot her rudder off), tow her to England, and condemn her for piracy in an Admiralty Court.'⁸² Nothing would have been more likely to unite the Icelanders against Britain (and the NATO, by implication), and both allies and adversaries would have condemned the government in London for outdated and imperialistic bullying. The same applied to Gilchrist's next suggestion: that British banks, where both the Icelandic authorities and individual companies were in constant debt, demand of these customers that they 'bring their accounts into balance by September 1.'⁸³

When the 'cod war' had begun and the risk of violent clashes at sea was clearly evident, Gilchrist felt that Britain should hold her course, continue to defend the trawlers and not be cowed by the 'fear of a little bloodshed on the way.'⁸⁴ A short while later, he also suggested that in retaliation for the arrest of a British trawler, Britain should seize the cargo-passenger liner *Gullfoss*, the pride of Iceland's merchant fleet, next time she arrived in a British port. Alterna-

tively, Icelandic aircraft could be detained.⁸⁵ Again, it is easy to imagine the undiluted fury which would have swept through Iceland had such a course been followed. And it must be added that these outbursts by Gilchrist were more the exception than the rule. Usually he understood the constraints on British power and Icelandic strength in the conflict better than the decision-makers in London.

Conclusion: Gilchrist and the three “cod wars”

The first ‘cod war’ ended in 1961. Britain accepted the twelve-mile limit in return for limited fishing rights inside it for the next three years and a guarantee from the Icelandic centre-right government, which had then assumed power, that if Iceland extended her limit again in contravention of British wishes, the parties would refer the matter to the International Court of Justice at The Hague. Despite these provisions, the outcome was a ‘[m]assive Icelandic victory,’ in Gilchrist’s opinion.⁸⁶ In 1971, a new, left-wing regime came to power in Reykjavík and declared itself unbound by the pledge about a referral to the International Court. The following year, the Icelandic fishing limit was extended to 50 miles. Britain protested and sent civilian vessels to assist British trawlers in the disputed waters. No warships arrived on the scene until 1973, however, after a winter of fairly successful harassment by Icelandic coast guard vessels. Not surprisingly, a mob of a few thousand young Icelanders gathered outside the British Embassy, smashed every window and caused great damage to the property.⁸⁷ This time, of course, Gilchrist had not been around to ‘incite’ the crowd. The Ambassador, John McKenzie, was a modest and quiet man who consciously tried to lie low when fevers ran high in Reykjavík.

This second ‘cod war’ ended in late 1973 with a compromise which was, again, rather in favour of the Icelanders. But the final conflict was still to come. In 1975, a new government in Iceland extended the limit to 200 miles. Although the international community was moving towards the codification of such extensive national jurisdiction, the Icelanders were ‘jumping the gun,’ as it were. For the third time in less than 20 years, the Royal Navy sailed north to protect British trawlers. This proved to be the hardest conflict, with regular rammings and collisions between the British protection vessels and the ships of the Icelandic coast guard. Kenneth East, an extremely able diplomat, could do nothing to prevent the intensification of the dispute and in February 1976 Iceland discontinued diplomatic relations with Britain. East had to leave Reykjavík. Again, Gilchrist was nowhere near, which serves to support the theory that he was not to blame for the outbreak of the first ‘cod war.’ To sum up, he was simply an insignificant quantity in the whole equation. The outcome was the same, with or without him.

This is not to say that individuals do not matter in the great structural scheme of things, but there were others who mattered more: Prime Minister Macmillan and his Cabinet in Britain, for instance, and politicians in Iceland. Therefore, the survey of Gilchrist’s involvement in the first ‘cod war’ of 1958-61 casts doubt on the assertion, to quote Lord Strang who headed the Foreign Office in the early 1950s, that ‘the head of a British diplomatic mission is far from being, in his negotiating role, the mere relay station or ventriloquist’s dummy that many people suppose him to be.’⁸⁸ In fact, he (the notion that a woman could be a head of a diplomatic mission was not recognised at the time) may be said to resemble such a ‘dummy.’ The role of a diplomat remains important but it is that of a messenger, not a mover. In other words, the diplomat is a ‘pathetic hero’ in international relations, uninvolved in the internal process of decision-making and bound by the impassivity of the diplomatic practise.⁸⁹ The course of the first ‘cod war’ between Iceland and Britain would have been very similar regardless of the actions and characteristics of Her Majesty’s Ambassador in Reykjavík. It could have been Micky Mouse or Machiavelli; it would not have made that much of a difference.

Notes:

- 1 For the former view, see for instance John Tosh's words that 'the historian who maintains an exclusive focus on the thoughts and actions of individuals (as diplomatic historians all too often do) is likely to find no shape, and to see instead only a chaotic sequence of accident and blunder.' John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History. Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London, 1984), 135. For the latter, see for instance John Young's view that 'however much our understanding of international developments has been improved by looking at the "realities behind diplomacy," history is also about contingencies, the coming together of particular forces, personalities and events at particular times.' John W. Young, *Britain and the World in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1997), 228.
- 2 This view is mainly put forward by Hannes Jónsson, a retired diplomat who was based in London during the dispute. See Hannes Jónsson, *Sendiherra á sagnabekk* (Reykjavík, 1994), 110-114, and *Friends in Conflict. The Anglo-Icelandic Cod Wars and the Law of the Sea* (London, 1982), 91-99. The critique is supported in Jón Th. Thór, *British Trawlers and Iceland 1919-1976* (Esbjerg, 1995), 187-189, and Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson, "'Thau eru svo eftirsótt Íslandsmid..." Samningavidræður Íslendinga og Breta í thorskastríðinu 1958-61,' *Saga*, Vol. 37, 1999, 68-69.
- 3 For an overview, see Jón Th. Thór, *Landhelgi Íslands 1901-1952* (Reykjavík, 1991), and David Ólafsson, *Saga landhelgismálsins. Baráttan fyrir stækkun fiskveiðilögsögunnar í 12 mílur* (Reykjavík, 1999), 45-82.
- 4 National Archives, Kew, London [hereafter NA]: FO371/100633, Johnson minute, 29.9.1952.
- 5 NA: FO371/100639, Muskett to Simpson, 11.12.1952. FO371/100639, Fitzmaurice minute, 12.12.1952. Also Jónsson, *Friends in Conflict*, 63-64.
- 6 E.g. NA: T165/247, Amending Note, April 1950, to Civil estimates, Class VI., 8 (1948-49), Main Note (October 1948), 'Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.' There were two Fisheries Departments in Whitehall, one in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the other in the Scottish Home Department.
- 7 E.g. NA: ADM1/25859, Wyatt to Abercrombie, 10.3.1950.
- 8 NA: FO371/100630, Faber minute, 7.5.1952.
- 9 See Jón Ólafsson, *Kæru félagar. Íslenskir sósíalistar og Sovétrikin 1920-1960* (Reykjavík, 1999), 164-173.
- 10 E.g. NA: FO371/111535, US Aide-Memoire, 18.11.1954, and FO371/122491, Ward minute, 11.6.1956.
- 11 NA: FO371/116441, Ward and Kirkpatrick minutes, 9.3. and 11.3.1955, and MAF209/1519, Leach minute, 24.8.1955.
- 12 NA: FO371/116448, Ward minute, 15.12.1955.
- 13 A Foreign Office colleague gave this description. See a letter from an anonymous diplomat to the author, 20.12.2000. See also Greenway's autobiography, *Fish, Fowl and Foreign Lands*, (London, 1950).
- 14 National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, USA [hereafter NARA]: RG263, Records of the Central Intelligence Agency. The Murphy Collection on International Communism 1917-1958. Iceland, Box 126. '4201 Iceland 1948,' Trimble Memorandum, 4.8.1948. Also Foreign Ministry Archives, Oslo [hereafter UD]: 31.11/60/II, Rysst minute, 16.4.1952.
- 15 NA: FO962/21, FO to Reykjavík, 20.11.1952 and 11.12.1952. Admittedly, it is not certain whether Greenway wrote these remarks, but surely nobody else in the Legation would have done so.
- 16 NA: FO371/106348, Henderson to Hohler, 31.3.1953. Henderson had been *chargé d'affaires* in Helsinki, First Secretary in Tokyo and Consul-General in Houston.
- 17 See for instance NA: FO371/106350, Henderson to Hohler, 7.7.1953.
- 18 Author's interview with Hilmar Foss, 6.9.2002, and NA: FO371/134963, Gilchrist to FO, 13.5.1958.
- 19 NA: FO371/106350, Statham minute, 19.9.1953. Also FO371/116443, Duffy minute, 16.6.1955.
- 20 Martin Mayer, *The Diplomats* (New York, 1983), 18 and Raymond Seitz, *Over Here* (London, 1998), 13. He calls the condition 'clientitis.'
- 21 Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink. Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2nd ed. 1982), 9. Also Jonathan M. Roberts, *Decision-Making during International Crises* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 143-152. For a summary of a critique on Janis's groupthink model, see Yaacov Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (Stanford, 1990), 241-246, 256-259.
- 22 A comparison may be made with Russell Bretherton, Britain's representative at the talks which led to the Messina Conference in 1955 and the formation of the European Economic Community. Infamously, he was marginalized in Whitehall and outdated ideas about Britain's strength and options certainly influenced top-level thinking on Europe in the Foreign Office. See James Ellison, *Threatening Europe. Britain and the Creation of the European Community, 1955-58* (Basingstoke, 2000), 15-21.
- 23 *The Times*, 11.3.1993 (Gilchrist's obituary).
- 24 For the strategic aspect, see Thór Whitehead, *The Ally Who Came in from the Cold. A Survey of Icelandic Foreign Policy 1946-1956* (Reykjavík, 1998), and Valur Ingimundarson, *The Struggle for Western Integration. Iceland, the United States, and NATO during the First Cold War* (Oslo, 1999). In the fall of 1956, the government decided to abandon demands for the removal of the United States military presence.
- 25 See for instance Foreign Office List 1957 (London, [no date]), 3, 264-265.
- 26 Andrew Gilchrist, *Cod Wars and How to Lose Them* (Edinburgh, 1978), 1.
- 27 UD: 31.11/60/V, Rysst to Foreign Ministry, 2.10.1956.
- 28 NA: FO371/122523, Gilchrist to FO, 2.10.1956.

- 29 NA: MAF209/1484, Savage minute, 5.1.1956.
- 30 NA: FO962/28, Gilchrist to Given, 3.10.1956 (cancelled).
- 31 NA: FO371/134956, Gilchrist to Brimelow, 14.2.1958. Also Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 67.
- 32 NA: FO371/122528, Gilchrist to Given, 29.11.1956.
- 33 NA: FO371/134956, Gilchrist to Brimelow, 14.2.1958.
- 34 For an overview of the conference, see for example W.W. Bishop, "The 1958 Geneva Convention on Fishing and Conservation of the Living Resources of the High Seas," *Columbia Law Review*, Vol. 62, No. 7, 1962, 1206-1229.
- 35 NA: FO371/127722, minutes from the interdepartmental 'Territorial Waters Committee' meeting, 4.12.1957, DEFE4/103, C.O.S. (58) 8th meeting, 23.1.1958, and CAB21/2762, Trend minute for Prime Minister, 17.2.1958.
- 36 NA: FO371/134956, Gilchrist to Joy, 20.1.1958, and FO371/134958, Gilchrist to FO, 17.4.1958.
- 37 NA: FO371/134957, Gilchrist to FO, 9.4.1958
- 38 NA: FO371/133750, Wright minute, 1.7.1958, and FO371/133746, Fitzmaurice, 'Report to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs on the International Conference on the Law of the Sea,' July 1958.
- 39 Edward McWhinney, "The Codifying Conference as an Instrument of International Law-Making: From the 'Old' Law of the Sea to the 'New'," *Syracuse Journal of International Law and Commerce*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1975, 309.
- 40 For a critical view, see Correlli Barnett, *The Verdict of Peace. Britain Between Her Yesterday and the Future* (London, 2001), and Michael Blackwell, *Clinging to Grandeur. British Attitudes and Foreign Policy in the Aftermath of the Second World War* (Westport, Connecticut, 1993). For more balanced assessments, see Richard Little, "The Study of British Foreign Policy" in Michael Smith, Steve Smith and Brian White (eds.), *British Foreign Policy. Tradition, Change and Transformation* (London, 1988), 252-253, and John Young, *Britain and the World in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1997), 145 and 159.
- 41 See Davis, *Iceland Extends*, 51-70.
- 42 NA: FO371/128766, Gilchrist to Given, 2.2.1957.
- 43 NA: FO371/134955, Brimelow memorandum, 8.1.1958. Also FO371/134957/NL1351/55, Joy memorandum, 15.3.1958.
- 44 NA: FO371/134958, Gilchrist to FO, 15.4.1958.
- 45 NA: FO371/134958, Gilchrist to FO, 18.4.1958.
- 46 NA: CAB129/92, C(58)99, 'Iceland: Fishery Limit,' Lloyd memorandum, 12.5.1958.
- 47 NA: FO371/134962, Gilchrist to FO, 12.5.1958.
- 48 NA: FO371/134966, Gore-Booth to Gilchrist, 22.5.1958.
- 49 Ivone Kirkpatrick, *Inner Circle* (London, 1959), 259, and R.G.S. Brown and D.R. Steel, *The Administrative Process in Britain* (London, 2nd ed. 1979), 207-208.
- 50 RA: 55.DAN.31/VII, Ambassador Kronmann, London, to Oldenburg, 4.6.1958.
- 51 Jónsson, *Friends in Conflict*, 85-86.
- 52 *The Times*, 11.3.1993 (Gilchrist's obituary). Also author's interviews with Sir James Cable, 25.1.2000, and David Summerhayes, 22.11.2002.
- 53 Jónsson, *Sendiherra á sagnabekk*, 110-112.
- 54 Matthías Johannessen, *Ólafur Thors II* (Reykjavík, 1981), 352-353. Also Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 44-46, 100-101.
- 55 E.g. Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 12-20, and 116-122. Also *Morgunblaðid* (Icelandic daily), 17.11.1994.
- 56 National Archives of Canada, Ottawa [hereafter NA-CAN]: RG25/3993/10009-40, Canadian Embassy in Oslo to Ottawa, 23.10.1959.
- 57 *News Chronicle*, 29.8.1958, and *Daily Express*, 30.5.1958.
- 58 Jónsson, *Sendiherra á sagnabekk*, 104, and Gudmundsson, "'Thau eru svo eftirsótt Íslandsmid...'" 68.
- 59 NA: FO371/134972, Gilchrist to Brimelow, 19.6.1958.
- 60 Jónsson, *Sendiherra á sagnabekk*, 104, 110. See also Johannessen, *Ólafur Thors II*, 353-354.
- 61 NA: FO371/134958, Gilchrist to FO, 24.4.1958, and FO371/134979, Gilchrist to FO, 8.8.1958.
- 62 For Gudmundsson, see for instance his private papers, in possession of Gudmundur I. Gudmundsson, Reykjavík: Gudmundsson to Stefán Jóhann Stefánsson, 8.6. and 3.7.1958. Also NARA: RG59/740B.00/6-2458, Muccio, Reykjavík, to Secretary of State, 24.6.1958, and NA: FO371/134973, Gilchrist to FO, 1.7.1958. For Andersen, see private papers of David Ólafsson, Central Bank of Iceland Archives: Andersen report on the Geneva conference on the law of the sea, 5.6.1958. Also UD: 31.11/60/VII, Permanent Delegation to NATO to Foreign Ministry, 1.8.1958, and NA: FO371/134978, Brimelow to Roberts, 30.7.1958.
- 63 NARA: RG59/740B.022/8-2658, Paris Embassy to Secretary of State, 26.8.1958.
- 64 NA: FO371/134982, Gilchrist to FO, 28.8.1958.
- 65 NA: FO371/134983, Gilchrist to FO, 31.8.1958. Also Ólafsson, *Saga landhelgismálsins*, 295-297.
- 66 NA: ADM306/8, Earl of Selkirk, First Lord of the Admiralty, to First Sea Lord, 31.8.1958.
- 67 See Gunnar M. Magnúss, *Landhelgisbókin* (Reykjavík, 1959), 94-119.
- 68 NA: FO371/134985, Brimelow minute, 3.9.1958. Also Davis, *Iceland Extends Its Fisheries Limits*, 126.
- 69 Foreign Ministry Historical Collection, National Archives of Iceland, Reykjavík [hereafter THÍSÓ]: 1993-3-1, Kristinn Gudmundsson, Ambassador in London, to Foreign Ministry, 8.10.1958.
- 70 Papers of Sir Andrew Gilchrist, Chirchill College, Cambridge. GILC12/C(1): Gilchrist to Leslie Milne, 6.8.1958.

- 71 NA: FO371/134982, Gilchrist to FO, 29.8.1958.
- 72 Thorgeir Thorgeirsson, *Ja – thessi heimur. Veraldarsaga og reisubók Péturs Karlssonar Kidson* (Reykjavík, 1984), 142.
- 73 Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 84-85.
- 74 BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading: News bulletin, 13:00, 3.9.1958.
- 75 The American ambassador was inclined to think that the demonstration was more or less spontaneous. See NARA: RG59/740B.022/9-358, Muccio, Reykjavík, to Secretary of State, 3.9.1958. Also author's interviews with Thór Whitehead, 29.12.2001, and Hilmar Foss, 5.9.2002, and *Thjóðviljinn* (Icelandic daily), 3.9.1958.
- 76 NA: FO371/143104, Gilchrist to Brimelow, 13.1.1959.
- 77 NA-CAN: RG25/3993/10009-40, Canadian Embassy in Oslo to Ottawa, 23.10.1959.
- 78 Private papers of Hilmar Foss, Reykjavík [hereafter HF]: Foss to Mangeot, 22.8.1959.
- 79 Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 89-90.
- 80 For the former comment, see HF: Foss to Mangeot, 15.9.1959. For the latter, see Jónsson, *Sendiherra á sagnabekk*, 114-115.
- 81 NA: FO371/143107, Brimelow minute, 11.3.1959.
- 82 NA: FO371/134963, Gilchrist to FO, 13.5.1958.
- 83 NA: FO371/134978, Gilchrist to Brimelow, 24.7.1958.
- 84 NA: FO371/134985, Gilchrist to FO, 5.9.1958.
- 85 NA: FO371/134991, Gilchrist memorandum, 4.10.1958.
- 86 Gilchrist, *Cod Wars*, 102.
- 87 *Guardian and Daily Telegraph*, 25.5.1973.
- 88 Lord Strang, *The Foreign Office* (London, 1955), 117.
- 89 See Sasson Sofer, 'Being a "Pathetic Hero" in International Politics: The Diplomat as a Historical Actor,' *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 12, No. 1, March 2001, 107-112.

Continue Trawling and Continue Negotiations: The 50-mile conflict

Soon after World War II, the German deep-sea trawling industry started the rebuilding of the fleet and fishing operations in areas far distant from their homeports at the German Bight. The grounds off Iceland quickly became one of the most important fishing regions for this fleet once again. Therefore it was no wonder that Germany was involved in the conflicts about fishery limits like any other European fishing nation. But during the twelve-mile conflict in the 1950s the Federal Republic of Germany was a young nation with a very special position in the field of international political affairs. Germany was not in the position to play a major role in the conflict. In fact Germany accepted the Icelandic claims to the twelve-mile limit virtually without engagement in the conflict.¹ Nevertheless, there was one aspect which would become important for the further development. After the conflict between Great Britain and Iceland was settled, the Federal Republic claimed a position similar to that of Great Britain regarding fishing rights off Iceland, and they were granted.² Particularly one point in the agreement of 1961 would become relevant in the future: Iceland and Germany agreed that a further widening of the Icelandic fisheries limit should be announced to the Federal Republic early and the International Court of Justice was accepted as a court for any conflicts that might result from any further action taken by Iceland.³



Fig. 1 In the 1970s, the factory-stern-trawlers of the so called *Universitäts-Klasse* made the German deep-sea fisheries fleet one of the world's most sophisticated fishing fleets. (Archiv DSM / Photo: DSM-Nordsee-Archiv)

Only ten years later, when Iceland unilaterally declared the new fishing limit of 50 miles in 1972⁴, this situation had changed dramatically. On the one hand, the Federal Republic of Germany was no longer an “underdog” on the political scene, but economically one of the most powerful nations in Western Europe and an important partner in the defence system of the NATO. On the other hand, the structure of German deep-sea fisheries had also changed. In the early 1970s, instead of a small fleet in a start-up period, Germany possessed one of the world’s most sophisticated fishing fleets. Only a few years earlier, one of the most challenging factory-trawler construction programmes had been completed.

At the beginning of the 1970s, the German deep-sea trawling fleet thus included not only 66 fresh-fish-trawlers but also 52 factory-stern-trawlers.⁵ The background for the building of this fleet was the assumption of increasing fish consumption in Germany as well as the unlimited availability of fishing grounds in the North Atlantic.

Iceland claim to the 50-mile limit was a real shock for the German fishing industry. The problem was not only the potential loss of one or two fishing grounds but the failure of investments worth hundreds of millions of German Marks or several billions of Icelandic crowns. The mere acceptance of the 50-mile limit was no option for the German fishing industry.

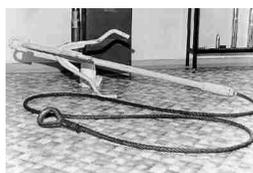


Fig. 2 The trawl wire cutter. (Landhelgisgæslan, Ísland)

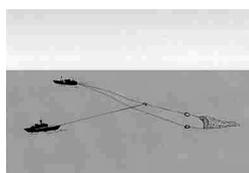


Fig. 3 Scheme of the use of the trawl wire cutter. (Landhelgisgæslan, Ísland)

After the failure of the first round of diplomatic negotiations⁶, Germany took the case to the International Court of Justice on June 5, 1972, just as Great Britain had done a few weeks earlier.⁷ When the new Icelandic regulations on the 50-mile limit went into effect, there was already an interim order by the International Court of Justice in The Hague.⁸ The court decided that Iceland was not entitled to use its new regulations against German and British trawlers but at the same time reduced the total annual catch of these fishing fleets in the Icelandic area. Although this judgement seems to have offered an interim solution to the conflict, neither side reacted as demanded by the court. Iceland used coast-guard vessels to prohibit any foreign trawling inside the 50-mile limit and Germany did not reduce its fishing activities.

Although there was a second interim order in July 1973⁹, the whole procedure at the International Court of Justice had no influence on the everyday situation in the grounds off Iceland. German fishing vessels continued trawling inside the limit and Iceland tried to prohibit any fishing by foreign trawlers by intensive use of coast-guard vessels and especially of a new weapon, the trawl wire cutter.

A few incidents with the use of weapons were reported, but they remained limited to a few exceptions without further consequences.¹⁰

By the autumn of 1973, the situation for German trawlers in the Icelandic area was very similar to that of British ships and is well known. But after the agreement between Great Britain and Iceland this situation changed dramatically and seems to have all but fallen into oblivion in Iceland and Germany alike.

When the agreement between Iceland and Great Britain was signed, all British trawlers and navy ships left the Icelandic area.¹¹ Only the German trawlers and a few fishery protection vessels continued their operations. At first, in the autumn of 1973 Germany decided to send an additional auxiliary fishery protection vessel to Iceland, the former trawler NORDENHAM. In the official announcement to the Icelandic government, the NORDENHAM was referred to as a hospital



Fig. 4 The trawler NORDENHAM as a provisional fishery protection vessel. (Archiv DSM)

ship¹², but its real duty was also to provide German trawlers with information about the operation areas of the Icelandic coast-guard vessels and if possible to assist the trawlers against the use of the trawl wire cutters.

The coast guard was increasingly successful in its struggle against the German trawlers and in October 1973 the OÐINN alone managed to cut the entire gear of three trawlers in less than ten days.¹³ A few days later the German government announced the sending of two further auxiliary fishery protection vessels to Iceland and beginning in January 1974 there were seven such ships operating in the Icelandic area. All were called hospital ships, but their duties comprised much



Fig. 5 The Icelandic coast-guard vessel OÐINN, the most important Icelandic ship in all the conflicts on fishing limits after World War II. (Photo: Heidbrink)



Fig. 6 The trawler ARCTURUS, the only German ship to be captured by Iceland. (Photo: DSM-Nordsee-Archiv)

more than the provision of medical and technical support to the fishing fleet. In a verbal note issued by the German embassy to the Icelandic ministry of foreign affairs, the tasks of the fishery protection vessels were described as follows:

“Within the framework of the pertinent instructions issued to them by the Federal Government, the German fishery protection vessels are trying to protect the German trawlers against such unlawful action by Icelandic coast-guard vessels.”¹⁴

Throughout this period, a continuous series of negotiations was in progress which seems to have been more or less successful. The only issue for which there seemed to be no solution whatsoever was that of the factory freezer trawlers. Then, however, on November 24, 1974, the ARCTURUS incident occurred, changing the entire situation. The German trawler ARCTURUS was brought up by an armed coast-guard vessel and the master of the ship was charged with illegal fishing before an Icelandic court.¹⁵ In response, the German fisheries and fishing harbour authorities now started to play hardball against Iceland.

All landings by Icelandic trawlers were banned in the German fishing ports.¹⁶ In fact, while Great Britain had sent its navy to Iceland as a demonstration of power, Germany now started to force a kind of an economic war against Iceland. Although Germany was not the main market for Icelandic trawlers, this ban caused serious damage to the Icelandic fisheries. This was not the first step towards an economic conflict. Already in March 1973 Germany had blocked negotiations on the reduction of tariffs between Iceland and the EU.¹⁷ Even during the annual meetings of the OECD and the GATT in 1974 Germany had adhered to its unbending position. While Iceland explained that 15.5% of its entire export to Germany was blocked by the landing ban and demanded a settlement via the OECD or GATT system, the German legation at the OECD simply declared: “We think that neither the OECD Convention nor the ‘Trade Pledge’ are in any way involved.”¹⁸

In fact the conflict between Germany and Iceland was in a deadlock. Iceland had neglected the competence of the International Court of Justice, and Germany the competence of the OECD and



Fig. 7 German fishery protection vessels such as the FRITHJOF were not navy vessels but civilian vessels under the flag of the ministry of agriculture. (Archiv DSM / Photo: Krüger)

the GATT. Furthermore, while the conflicts between Iceland and all other fishing nations had been settled, Germany continued trawling inside the limit and continued bilateral negotiations.

So much for the pure facts, but what was the background of this behaviour – so different from that of any other fishing nation – and what were the results? Why was there no chance for an agreement of the kind concluded between Iceland and Great Britain in 1973? Was there an advantage to be gained by Germany or would have it been better to accept an agreement?

As mentioned earlier, there were two structural differences between Germany and Great Britain: First of all, the German fishing fleet consisted to a much larger extent than the British of factory-freezer trawlers. Secondly – and perhaps more importantly – the German fishery protection was not part of the navy but of the civilian fleet of the ministry of agriculture.

For this reason the engagement of the German fishery protection vessels could hardly be interpreted as military action against Iceland. After the British navy vessels had left the Icelandic area, the military conflict seemed to be solved. Even the increased operations of German fishery protection vessels could not be seen as an escalation of the conflict. In fact, this situation was something of a political trap for Iceland. On the one hand everybody could assume that the actual task of the fishery protection vessels was similar to that of the British navy vessels; on the other hand, any sympathy for Iceland would have been lost if Iceland had started to take action against civilian hospital ships. The use of civilian fishery protection vessels instead of navy vessels prohibited an escalation of the conflict on the fishing grounds.

The question of the factory freezer trawlers was more difficult. These ships naturally used the same fishing gear as the fresh-fish catchers and the German interpretation of factory freezer trawlers as vessels of similar quality as fresh-fish catchers appeared correct at first sight. But it was a matter of fact that these ships had much better means of reacting to bad catches on one fishing ground over a certain period of time. Because of the freezing equipment they could stay in the Icelandic region as long as it was necessary to get a full load. The German argumentation that Iceland was not entitled to blame the German deep sea trawling fleet because of its state of

technological development could not be accepted by Iceland. Nobody in Iceland promoted the sophistication of the German trawlers, and why should a sovereign nation like Iceland accept disadvantages caused only by the expectation of better economic benefits in a foreign country?

Despite the fact that, in the course of the negotiations, Iceland made several offers for an arrangement which would have granted Germany a phasing out of the Iceland fisheries without major disadvantages, Germany replied to all offers in the same way. The possibility of the use of factory freezer trawlers was a *conditio sine qua non*. In retrospect this seems especially irrational, because the Icelandic area was not the main operational area for those ships. The factory freezer trawlers operated near Newfoundland, Labrador and Greenland as well as in other very far distant fishing grounds. Iceland was the operational area for the remaining fleet of fresh-fish catchers. In fact, the factory freezer trawler question could not have been the real reason why Germany stuck to its position.

An explanation may be found in the catch data pertaining to the early 1970s. When the Icelandic-British agreement was signed in 1973, the annual catch of German trawlers near Iceland (1972) was 95,000 t.¹⁹ In the negotiations Germany demanded a quota of 105,000 t. But a quota that would have been comparable with the Icelandic-British agreement would have been only 65,000 t, which was exactly what Iceland offered in the negotiations.²⁰ The acceptance of this offer would have meant the loss of 30,000 t of catch per year in comparison to the actual situation. A volume of 30,000 t annual catch in comparison to 35 fishing gears cut by the Icelandic coast-guard vessels: From the purely economic point of view the conclusion was clear: Continue trawling. But why also continue negotiations? Of course, most of the delegates were interested in finding a solution to the conflict. But the continuation of the negotiations was at the same time a tool to prevent an increase of the Icelandic actions against German trawlers. As long as an agreement seemed to be within reach, the negotiations prohibited further Icelandic action.

Altogether a minimum of 35 fishing gears of German trawlers were cut by the Icelandic coast guard and nearly 500 attempts to stop German trawling operations were reported.²¹

– For the possibility of catching an additional 30,000 t of fish per year, this was a more reasonable price than would have been demanded by any negotiated arrangement.

But how was the situation finally resolved?

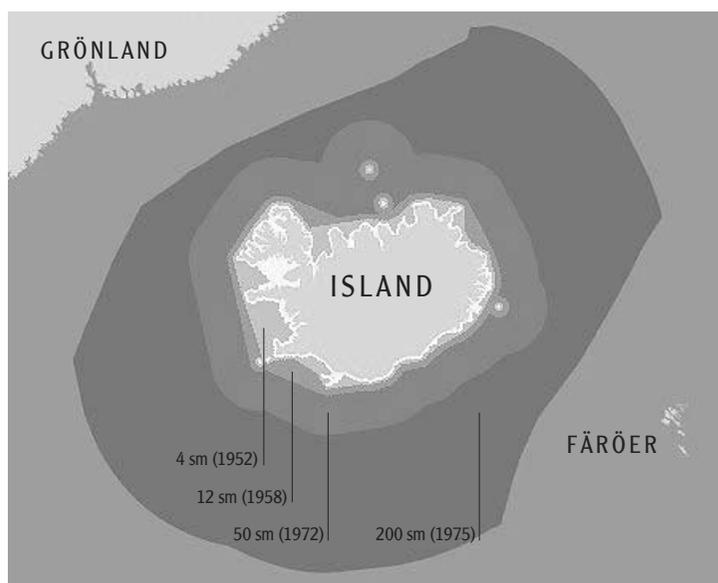


Fig. 8 The development of the Icelandic fisheries limit to 200 nm. (Landhelgisgæslan, Ísland)

In 1975 Iceland announced a further step in its widening of the fishery limits, now to 200 miles. Great Britain responded once again with navy vessels and another real cod war started.

At the same time the negotiations in the United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea reached a stage where it became clear that future international law would include expanded fisheries limits for the coastal nations. The era of the 'continue trawling and continue negotiations' policy was over. There were only two solutions: either join the British side and take action against the Icelandic coast-guard vessels or accept the loss of the fishing grounds. Germany chose the second option. Between 1972 and 1975/1976 there was enough time to restructure the German fishing industry on the basis of fish import instead of the country's own catches. What is more, it was no longer possible to keep the conflict out of the limelight of the international political scene.

To sum up, the German behaviour in the 50-mile conflict was closely related to the fact that nearly everybody in Iceland thought only of Great Britain in connection with the fishing conflicts. Germany could therefore continue trawling without attracting major attention. Even at a time when Germany was the only nation that had not accepted the Icelandic regulations of 1972, the amount of attention paid to the matter in Iceland was not a great as that paid to the previous conflict with the British, as the German action was a purely civilian operation without any interference by the navy.

In a certain sense, Germany continued exploiting its early post-World-War-II position as a political "underdog" with a minor fishing fleet despite the fact that by the 1970s it was a politically and economically important nation with one of the largest deep-sea fishing fleets in Europe. Germany did not give a demonstration of naval power against Iceland, but tried to a certain extent to hide its fishing and fishery protection activities. This can be regarded as merely another form of unfair play – and I am sure it was not gentleman-like – but in a certain sense it was successful. The British approach of blaming a small nation by a demonstration of naval power failed much earlier than the German concept of accepting Iceland as an equal partner, at least when Iceland declared the 200-mile fisheries limit.

Although this paper deals with one of the most difficult periods of the German-Icelandic fisheries history, and surely – in retrospect – it can be said that there were mistakes and awkward behaviour on both sides, I will finish this paper with one very important aspect which should not be forgotten: Even in the worst times of the conflict there was an unwritten agreement on support in any emergency. For example, the German fishery protection vessels offered their support for the evacuation of Heimaey after the volcanic eruption in 1973, and the Icelandic coast guard and the entire Icelandic society granted every kind of medical support to any German crew member of a trawler after an accident or injury of any type, even if it happened during illegal fishing inside the Icelandic fisheries limit.

You will know the frequently quoted term "friends in conflict" or – in a translation of a German term – "the art of war between friends" and that is in my opinion not only the background for the good relations in the fisheries branches of Iceland and Germany today but also for the ceremony in Vík í Mýrdal tomorrow. The opening of a fisheries memorial that will not be only in honour of those crew members of German trawlers who lost their lives on the fishing grounds off Iceland but as well in honour of those Icelanders who risked their lives in rescue operations.

The chapter of history which dealt with the fisheries conflicts is as much concluded as German fishery off Iceland, and it is time to remember a development which started 111 years ago with the arrival of the first German trawler off Iceland, time to express thanks for the good relations between our nations despite the difficult decades, and time to look forward to a future of responsible use of the resources of the oceans as our common heritage, administrated by the coastal nations, as well as good trade and general relations between our nations.

Notes:

- 1 O.V.: "Der Fischereistreit um Island spitzt sich zu." In: *Allgemeine Fischwirtschaftszeitung* 10, 1958, No. 36, p. 3.
- 2 Wengler, Wilhelm: "Die isländische Fischereivorbehaltszone vor dem Internationalen Gerichtshof." In: *Neue juristische Wochenschrift* 26, 1973, p. 936-940.
- 3 Bekanntmachung über das Inkrafttreten des deutsch-isländischen Fischereiabkommens. From August 14, 1961. Published in: *Bundes-Anzeiger* 1961, No. 172, p. 1.
- 4 Ministry for Foreign Affairs: *Fisheries Jurisdiction in Iceland*. Reykjavik, 1972, p. 19.
- 5 Baartz, Roland: *Entwicklung und Strukturwandel der deutschen Hochseefischerei unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer Bedeutung für Siedlung, Wirtschaft und Verkehr Cuxhavens*. Hamburg, Stuttgart, 1991, p. 348.
- 6 Thór, Jón Th.: *British Trawlers and Iceland 1919-1976*. Esbjerg, 1995, p. 203.
- 7 Rüster, Bernd: "Überlegungen zum isländischen Fischereistreit." In: *Festschrift für F. Berber*. Munich, Berlin, 1973, p. 449-466.
- 8 International Court of Justice: Fisheries Jurisdiction Case (Federal Republic of Germany v. Iceland). Interim Protection. Order of 17 August 1972.
- 9 International Court of Justice: Fisheries Jurisdiction Case (Federal Republic of Germany v. Iceland). Interim Protection. Order of 12 July 1973.
- 10 Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum, Nordsee-Archiv: Island-Konflikt I-IV: Kapitänsberichte der betroffenen Trawler.
- 11 Thór, Jón Th.: *British Trawlers and Iceland 1919-1976*. Esbjerg, 1995, p. 213.
- 12 Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands: Utanríkisráðuneytið 1996 B/88: Árekstrar milli V-Þýskra togara og íslenska varðskipa 1.1.1973-1.2.1975. 15 D 10a Pk.nr.1:
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- 13 Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum, Nordsee-Archiv: Island-Konflikt II: Sofortmeldungen der Trawler SPITZBERGEN, HESSEN und OTHMARSCHEN.
- 14 Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands: Utanríkisráðuneytið 1996 B/88: Samniagaviðræður við V-Þjóverja fiskveiðiréttindi 1.1.1973-1.12.1974. 15 D 10 (áður 15 D 4):
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- 15 Ibid.: Verbal note: RK 500.52 No. 129. December 6, 1974 – Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany / The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Iceland.
- 16 Ibid.: German declaration on the German-Icelandic fishery conflict at the OECD council session of December 17, 1974 in Paris.
- 17 O.V.: "Noch keine Zollsenkung für Island." In: *Allgemeine Fischwirtschaftszeitung* 25, 1973, No. 7, p. 5.
- 18 Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands: Utanríkisráðuneytið 1996 B/88: Samniagaviðræður við V-Þjóverja fiskveiðiréttindi 1.1.1973-1.12.1974. 15 D 10 (áður 15 D 4): German declaration on the German-Icelandic fishery conflict at the OECD council session of December 17, 1974 in Paris.
- 19 Thór, Jón Th.: *British Trawlers and Iceland 1919-1976*. Esbjerg, 1995, p. 243.
- 20 Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands: Utanríkisráðuneytið 1996 B/88: Samniagaviðræður við V-Þjóverja fiskveiðiréttindi 1.1.1973-1.12.1974. 15 D 10 (áður 15 D 4): Pressemitteilung Nr. 206/1973. 24. Oktober 1973. Vereinigte Wirtschaftsdienste GmbH, Zweigstelle Bremen.
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► INGO HEIDBRINK

The Fisheries Memorial in Vík í Mýrdal

Between 1898 and 1952 more than eighty German trawlers were lost during fishing operations off Iceland. Most of these ships stranded on the southeastern coast of Iceland on the black sand-shores between Vík and Ingolfshöfði or on the cliffs of the southwestern coast. Others sank on the fishing-grounds and twenty-five were never accounted for. Altogether some one thousand fishermen lost their lives on board German trawlers operating off Iceland. The Iceland fishery was one of the most dangerous activities in the whole history of German deep-sea fishing.

Just these simple figures would be reason enough to commemorate those fishermen who lost their lives near the island in the far North Atlantic. But the story would not be complete without mentioning those who survived such a stranding or any other kind of accident, and survival often – or nearly always – depended on the support of local people on the south coast of Iceland. Therefore it was clear that any memorial erected in connection with these events should take both aspects into account, the commemoration of the fishermen as well as the gratitude to the Icelanders who risked their own lives during rescue operations.

But what is the story behind the memorial?

Since 1997 a volunteer study group on “fisheries history” has worked in close connection with the Department of Fisheries History at the German Maritime Museum. Particularly the early history of German deep-sea trawling was a focus of the joint research and Iceland was therefore naturally one of the most relevant topics. While reviewing the documents in the archives, a member of the study group found a picture that seemed to have been misplaced in the archive of a trawling company: a group of men on horseback in front of an Icelandic shop in the first decade



Members of the Working Group “Fisheries Memorial”.

The Museum in Vík í Mýrdal.



of the 20th century. But a second view clarified the situation. The men on the horses were the crew of the lost German trawler WÜRTEMBERG and their Icelandic rescuers. The interest in further research was born.

During the following period, members of the study group as well as the Department of Fisheries History concentrated research on losses of trawlers and other kind of accidents. Hilda Peters, a retired manager of the fishing company NORDSEE, became a real expert on nearly every accident that happened in the early days of German fishing operations off Iceland. And she reactivated her former professional contacts to Iceland. Nearly every newly rediscovered story of a German trawler lost off Iceland was a story of dramatic rescue action entailing the risk of death for both the shipwrecked crew members and their Icelandic helpers. When it became clear how many ships had been lost and how many people had drowned, the idea of a memorial was born. Particularly the fact that there were no memorials to the crew members of German trawlers on Icelandic graveyards – although there are several for crew members of British or French trawlers – lent support to the idea.



The Fisheries Memorial after its opening on Sept. 15th, 2002.



Close-up of the memorial stone.

Then, in the process of research in the Icelandic National Archives, a contact arose with an Icelandic volunteer group operating the local museum in Vík í Mýrdal, a small village at the southern shore of Iceland and right in the centre of the area in which most trawlers were lost. The discussion of general facts concerning German-Icelandic fisheries history led easily to talk about the idea of a memorial.

At the beginning of 2001, the study group "Fisheries History" decided to start with the realization of the project and the Robert Bosch Foundation agreed to cover the costs of the voluntary work (communication, travel, etc.). The costs for the monument itself were covered only by donations from private persons, companies and institutions of the fishing industry. The design of the monument was a result of the study group itself and called for the use of Northern German granite as a symbol of the stranded trawlers and Icelandic basalts to symbolize the Icelandic rescuers.

In the summer of 2002 the granite was shipped to Iceland and on Sept. 15th the opening ceremony took place in Vík í Mýrdal. The Icelandic consul in Bremerhaven, Reinhard Meiners, supported the project from the time of its inception and managed to convince the Icelandic prime minister, Davíð Oddsson, to become the patron of the memorial.