

The History of Safety at Sea

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Since the earliest times, the sea has always been synonymous with insecurity for those who venture on to it. He that would sail without danger must never come on the main sea, as the proverb puts it. This endemic absence of safety probably explains why early maritime trade was mainly the preserve of adventurers. The sea was associated with the idea of chance or fate, a concept still to be found in expressions such as "maritime perils". Seaborne transport developed in such a laissez-faire way that the many accidents of which bold navigators were victims were soon accepted as part of the natural course of things. As a leading contemporary professor of maritime law puts it, the frailty of the human factor, in the face of the inexhaustible and indefinable sea, confers on the effort of navigation the character of a bold venture, which may succeed and prove quite profitable, but which can also fail and cause irreparable losses.[1]

The history of navigation since ancient times shows that the needs of safety came only gradually to the fore, in the wake of accidents and disasters, bringing about huge changes in the individual and collective behaviour of those engaged in maritime activities, who clung to ancient practices and habits.

Insecurity at Sea in Ancient Times

It might be thought that there were relatively few risks at sea in olden times, when craft of modest size, and few in number, using sails or oars as their mode of propulsion, never ventured far from the coast. In fact, the period was one of persistent insecurity, making sea voyages extremely hazardous. In addition to bad sea and weather conditions, piracy was rife throughout the Mediterranean. Ships were hard to handle and could so easily be tossed about by winds and currents. Shipwrecks, usually caused by storms, remained a frequent occurrence.

Until the end of the Roman Empire, seafarers were ill equipped to confront bad weather. Passengers and bulky cargoes were packed together on deck. Ships were loaded well beyond safety limits. Navigators knew little about winds. Derisory efforts were made to combat storms: the ship was bound round with ropes fore and aft, to prevent it splitting apart, and an anchor was dragged behind to slow down its progress[2].

Another method of dealing with imminent danger was to cast objects overboard: the cargo, rigging and even victuals were jettisoned to lighten the vessel. The decision was taken by the pilot, the ship's owner, or the most prominent or experienced passengers. The Romans adopted their own interpretation of the practices of navigators from the island of Rhodes. The Lex Rhodia de Jactu stated that, if part of the cargo had to be jettisoned, the loss was to be borne by the owner of the ship and the owners of the cargo[3]. This provision survives in modern maritime law, with the system of "general average".

One of the most effective preventive measures was a ban on sailing in winter, putting the seas out of bounds during the worst weather. The ban was not applied uniformly. In Rome, the period during which navigation was permitted lasted only from 27 May to 14 September. Certain calendars were even more restrictive, providing for a period of only fifty days starting at the summer equinox. The practice of laying-up in winter was justified mainly by meteorological conditions, particularly the dreadful storms. Cloudy skies often



made it impossible to observe the stars, customarily used to determine the direction of the ship. The ban on sailing was accompanied in Roman law by an administrative penalty: no ship could leave port unless it held a dimissorium, a kind of sailing permit issued by the appropriate official[4].

Ultimately, the safety of a voyage rested on the shoulders of a single man, the equivalent of the captain in ancient times. He bore technical responsibility for and the choice of the safest route and ports of call[5]. However, his decisions were overridden by shipowners anxious to earn higher profits by sailing even in bad weather. Some ships took even greater risks than warships, and this explains the frequency with which shipwrecks occurred.

The Beginnings of Accident Prevention in the Middle Ages

Conditions of navigation underwent very little significant change throughout the Middle Ages. Ships stayed in port in winter. Until the end of the 18th century, the Levantines sailed only from 5 May to 26 October[6]. In the Baltic, maritime traffic was banned between Martinmas and Saint Peter's Day (22 February), on pain of confiscation of the cargo[7]. Ships never went out of sight of the coast. Open-sea navigation was initiated in the Mediterranean from the 13th century, but not until the 15th century in the North. Hanseatic mariners found the position of their ships by using a sounding lead to measure the depth of the seabed at any point on their voyage[8].

Advances in ship safety did occur in the Middle Ages, with the implementation of the first preventive rules on loading. According to commentators, these originated in the Lex Rhodia. From the mid-13th century, the maritime authorities in large Mediterranean ports introduced very strict legislation on freeboard, in order to combat the abuses of unscrupulous shipowners and captains who overloaded their ships, at the risk of losing them, in order to earn more from the freight.

The very first regulations appeared in Venice in 1255. They made it illegal to exceed the draught, marked on each ship by a cross. Similar provisions were to be found in Cagliari and Pisa at the same period, and also in Barcelona, in the decree issued by Iago de Aragon in 1258, and in the maritime statutes of Marseilles in 1284. The most elaborate regulations appeared in the 14th-century Genoese statutes.

In 1330, the maritime authorities in Genoa had already laid down not only very precise rules for calculating the maximum draught of certain ships, but also an inspection procedure and a whole range of penalties for anyone contravening the rules. The Afficium Gazarie appointed officials to measure ships in accordance with the rules in force, and attend to the affixing of irons to the hull, the precursors of loadlines. On every voyage, the captain or owner had to designate two of the merchants on board to keep watch on these iron markers. A system of guarantee payments and fines ensured that the law was applied strictly[9].

Despite these measures, shipwrecks remained a common occurrence in the Mediterranean, particularly during the winter season. A single storm, such as occurred in 1545 in the Adriatic, could sink fifty vessels[10]. Northerners relied on repression: the Hanseatic League introduced very severe criminal legislation to discourage the most audacious adventurers. Measures applied mainly to the pilot, who was responsible for directing the ship. The Sea Laws of Oleron mention very stringent penalties for anyone failing in his duty. The captain, who exercised absolute authority on board, was empowered to cut off the luckless pilot's head if by ignorance he had endangered the cargo and the crew. In fact, these punishments were so barbarous that they were practically never applied[11].

Policing of Navigation to the End of the 18th Century

As the modern age dawned, the growth of seaborne trade, marked by an increase in the number of ships, their greater speed and capacity, and the value of the property transported in them, provided an incentive for the introduction of policing methods among the major maritime nations.

Preventive rules became more generalised. A Spanish ordinance of 1563 required shipbuilders and owners to see to the perfect seaworthiness of their vessels, check the low water level, and lash the cargo securely[12]. A Venetian law of 8 June 1569 prohibited shipowners from placing goods at certain places on the ship. In France, an edict on the Admiralty issued by the French king Henri III in March 1584 required maritime cities to oversee the abilities of ships' captains. The Marine Ordinance of August 1681 devoted a whole section to seamen and ships[13].

The most innovative measure consisted of stipulating ship surveys by the authorities in order to prevent accidents caused by the poor condition of a ship or inadequate equipment. Northern countries were the first to impose a system of surveys. The Recesses of the Diet of the Hanseatic League of 1412, 1417 and 1447 contain references to this requirement. The Low Countries Ordinance of 1549 instituted a double survey, before and after loading of the cargo. The Genoese law of 1607 entrusted surveys to the "magnificent curators of the sea".

In France, organization of the administrative supervision of shipping in ports dates back to Colbert's Naval Ordinance, which introduced the office of *huissier-visiteur*, or surveyor. A Royal declaration of 17 August 1779 completed these provisions by instituting the requirements of dual survey of ships, on the outward voyage and on the return trip. The most important text was adopted under the Revolution, with the Act of 9 August 1791 concerning navigational policing. This laid a strict obligation on captains of ships equipped for long voyages to solicit a survey before equipment and then before loading of the vessel. Inspections were carried out by surveyor-officers or surveyor-inspectors, consisting of certain navigators, builders or carpenters, appointed by the Commercial Courts, or by the local Mayor[14].

Despite these measures, risk prevention remained a very rudimentary matter. The safety of maritime trade was ensured mainly by introducing legislation to provide compensation and protection for the financial interests of shipowners. An original legal system was gradually established, based on the principle that the various parties with an interest in maritime transport had to bear their share of liability, and that only they were concerned with such problems[15]. Several legal provisions met these requirements: joint ownership of ships, for instance, aimed at reducing hazards by sharing risks. Other mechanisms, such as bottomry, allowed their transfer[16]. A third technique met with prompt success. It consisted of the involvement of a third party, the insurer, who took the place of the person normally bearing the risk[17]. The events that led to accidents remained largely unknown and highly diversified, so that legislation to define the sharing of liabilities and repair of damage finally appeared as the most cogent solution and the most appropriate answer to the problem of insecurity[18].

Growth of Interventionism in the 19th Century

The technological innovations that accompanied the Industrial Revolution encouraged the development of maritime transport during the 19th century. The most important developments were undoubtedly the introduction of steam-powered engines on board ships and the construction of iron and then steel hulls. These technical advances were accompanied, however, by an increase in risks at sea, corresponding to the greater number, size and speed of the vessels engaged in trade. Accident statistics reflect the acuteness of the problem: during the winter of 1820 alone, more than two thousand ships were wrecked in the North Sea, causing the deaths of twenty thousand people[19].

The principal attempts to achieve greater safety took place within a purely private framework: administrative supervision of shipping was regarded as a hindrance to free trade. There were fears of over-zealous states adopting excessively restrictive and invasive regulations, out of place in an industry subject to such fierce international competition. It was generally considered that the proper interest of the shipowner, who had committed all his wealth to the acquisition of ships, ultimately represented the best guarantee of safety for all concerned. This laissez-faire attitude remained predominant through the first half of the 19th century, which saw the birth of the earliest classification societies. These purely private organizations made a fundamental contribution to the assessment of the safety of merchant ships by providing maritime insurers with accurate and regular information on the quality of shipping and ship equipment.

The middle of the century marked a decisive turning point on the issue of safety at sea, with the proliferation of preventive rules, increasingly introduced within an official framework. Two essential factors explain this growing state interventionism:

- Maritime transport was becoming a real industry, and so it was normal for the authorities to exercise their general policing powers, to monitor the safety conditions on board ships. This was in the interests of seamen, but also of the increasing numbers of other people who went on board ships. Gradually, industrial legislation affecting equipment, manpower and operating conditions were applied to the merchant navy;
- The need to harmonise national rules, habits and customs in the yea of navigation also helped reinforce the role of States, the only entities entitled under international law to sign agreements, treaties and other mandatory instruments.

State interventionism resulted in an extraordinary increase in the number of public law provisions relating to the safety of ships and navigation.

Increased Control of Ships

Two countries that displayed considerable transformations in preventive regulations and ship survey procedures were France and Britain.

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Development of French regulations

Promulgation of the 1808 Commercial Code did not make any fundamental changes in the previous system. It repeated provisions on surveys of departing ships laid down in 1779 and 1791 texts. These requirements concerning annual surveys were gradually extended to other vessels: steamships under the terms of an order of 17 January 1846, fishing craft and vessels engaged on home-trade navigation, under the Decree of 4 July 1853, ships carrying emigrants under the Act of 18 July 1860, steam packets under the Decree of 11 September 1896, and lifesaving equipment, under the Decree of 26 June 1903.

From 1870, legislation on the carriage of dangerous goods was introduced. Loading and unloading of such cargoes were regulated by a Decree of 2 September 1874.

Laws on merchant shipping, adopted on 29 January 1881 and 30 January 1893, and the Decree of 1st February 1893 reinforced inspection procedures. This Decree stipulated annual surveys of steamships by surveillance commissions instituted by the Préfets of territorial Departments, in the various ports involved in such navigation. A navigation license was issued to the shipowner by the Préfets, after examining survey reports. Despite their complexity, surveys remained incomplete, and indeed certain ships were never inspected. Surveys were now periodic, and no longer coincided with a ship's voyages, so that they were less effective. They were confined to

the strength and equipment of the vessel, and were concerned neither with the loading of the ship nor the abilities of the crew. There was also criticism of the impartiality of the surveyor captains, who were often indulgent towards substandard ships, particularly whenever they belonged to shipowners who were members of the commercial court to which the surveyors owed their appointment[20].

The whole system underwent far-reaching changes under the Act of 17 April 1907, completed by two Decrees on 20 and 21 September 1908. These measures introduced public health and safety rules on navigation. They covered every aspect of ship safety, building and preservation conditions, equipment and installations, conditions of loading and operation. The Act also set up a body of navigation inspectors responsible for carrying out ordinary and special departing surveys. Regarded as the basis of modern French regulations, these standard-setting and administrative provisions mark the final preeminence of state control of rules of on maritime safety.

Establishment of British legislation

Under the pressure of public opinion, disturbed by the recurrence of accidents, at sea, British legislators, like those in France, sought to strengthen the safety of maritime transport. This interventionist attitude, however, came up against the resistance of traditional maritime circles, with little inclination to accept state interference in private business. Finally, interventionism was to win in gradual stages, culminating in the adoption of very detailed preventive regulations affecting the whole sector.

This trend began in 1836 with the appointment of a Parliamentary Select Committee to examine the causes of the steady increase in shipwrecks. The investigation drew attention to ten determining factors, including defective construction, inadequate equipment, imperfect state of repair, improper and excessive loading, incompetence of masters, drunkenness among officers and crew, and marine insurance which inclined shipowners to disregard safety. A first aerie of measures was introduced after the publication of the parliamentary report. In 1839, restrictions were placed on the transport of timber deck cargoes in the North Atlantic. In 1840 appeared the first rules on lights and traffic at sea. From 1846, passenger ships had to be inspected by officially approved surveyors.

The most important advance came with the Merchant Shipping Act of 1850. This legislation marked the real start of State action under the auspices of the Board of Trade, which had the task of monitoring, regulating and controlling all issues relating to merchant shipping, and more specifically the safety of ships and the working conditions of seamen, in order to correct the serious abuses that had been found. A bill passed in 1854 strengthened the powers of this government body. Also adopted was a whole series of technical provisions concerning safety equipment on wooden ships. The law also required iron ships to be fitted with a collision bulkhead and engine bulkheads. However, these measures had little effect, and an average of two thousand ships were lost annually. In 1867 alone, there were 1,313 shipwrecks causing the death of 2,340 British sailors and 137 passengers[21].

In 1873, a Royal Commission was set up to investigate the claimed unseaworthiness of British vessels, particularly the conditions of loading. A member of Parliament, Samuel Plimsoll, made a number of observations, denouncing the scandal of "coffin ships". A year after the publication of his manifesto, Parliament adopted the Merchant Shipping Act of 1876, known as the "Plimsoll Act". This laid down new requirements, with criminal penalties for shipowners found guilty of operating ships that presented a risk for human life. The Board of trade was for the first time authorised to detain substandard ships coming to take on cargoes in British ports.

The Plimsoll Act, which instituted draught of water marks, put an end to the dangerous practice of leaving the captain complete discretion as to loading. The new regulations banned bulk loading of grain, in order to prevent the cargo shifting, and grain in sacks as deck cargo. Any

infringement warranted the arrest of the ship. The Act also required all merchant vessels of more than 80 tons to display a maximum loadline. Despite its very stringent provisions, the Plimsoll Act did not put an end to the scandal of shipwrecks. In 1882, more than three thousand seamen and three hundred and sixty passengers perished in more than 1,120 shipping accidents to British vessels.

Another Royal Commission was appointed in 1884, to try and end this dismal record. In its final report, published in 1887, the Commission recommended several improvements to the safety of steamships, which had gradually replaced sailing ships. In 1890, the Merchant Shipping Load Line Act laid down official rules for freeboard tables and calculations. These had been introduced five years earlier, on an experimental and purely voluntary basis, by the Board of Trade, which relied on the work of Lloyd's Register and Bureau Veritas to give them formal expression.

Up to the end of the century, the British legislative armoury was strengthened by many provisions, though without altering its fundamental mechanisms. The basic regulations, laid down in the 1894 Merchant Shipping Act, as amended by the Act of 21 December 1906, increased the seaworthiness and safety of ships, and health arrangements on board. Loadline requirements were applied to all vessels, including foreign ships visiting British ports.

Interventionism finally triumphed in all the major maritime nations, which followed the British model: Denmark with the Acts of 13 February 1890, 14 May 1909 and 3 January 1911, Sweden with the ordinance of 1st July 1898, Norway with the Acts of 13 February 1890, 14 May 1909 and 3 January 1911, 1st July 1898, Norway with the Acts of 9 June 1903, 3 October 1908, 24 April 1906, 8 August 1908 and 14 July 1909. On 7 June 1902, Germany promulgated an Act concerning seafarers. The Netherlands adopted a shipping bill on 1st July 1909, United States regulations on safety at sea were set out in the Seamen's Act of March 1915. Spain drew up measures similar to British legislation with its two Decrees of 18 January 1924 concerning safety on board ship and lifesaving appliances.

First Navigation Rules

The 19th century also saw the first regulations on navigation at sea. Around 1840, with the earliest steamships, a number of nations became concerned about what steps could be taken to avoid collisions and shipwrecks. At the time, each of them acted separately. No ships carried navigation lights, except warships travelling in squadron by night. Whenever two vessels approached each other, it was customary to show one's presence by hoisting a flag or lighting a flare. British ships applied the signalling rules proposed by W.D, Evans, regarded as the father of present-day regulations.

The simplicity and effectiveness of British rules were appreciated by seamen in all countries, to such an extent that France, where maritime circles had long been calling for uniform legislation, signed an agreement in 1848 with Great Britain about the lighting of steamships. This was not exactly an international convention, but simply the acceptance of identical general rules in both countries[22]. This first agreement met with resounding success, however, for its provisions were immediately copied and adopted by other leading maritime nations.

France and Britain subsequently signed other agreements, gradually setting up a proper maritime traffic policing force. An 1852 agreement covered signalling for sailing ships. In 1856, a series of rules on maritime signals established a communications guide containing 78,000 combinations of only eighteen flags[23]. Another agreement in 1856 set standards for navigation in fog, and in 1862 the first joint rules for routes at sea were laid down. In 1884, the two countries signed a treaty on lighting of fishing boats and special signals to be assigned to telegraph cable-laying ships.

All these rules were gradually introduced into French regulations on collision avoidance, with the Decrees of 28 May 1856, 19 September 1879, 1st September 1884 and 21 February 1897.

Internationalisation of Regulations in the 20th Century

The quest for some uniformity of national rules and customs regarding safety at sea has intensified throughout the 20th century. But before going back over the main steps in this internationalisation of maritime law, it is worth summarising the causes of the trend.

Reasons for Internationalisation

Several factors incited the major maritime nations to set up joint safety rules.

· Problem of the high seas

The intention was to set the conditions for exercising the freedom of the high seas in the interests of the whole international community, and also to avoid anarchy leading to dangerous conditions for maritime navigation. The introduction of maritime traffic policing raised no problem in those parts of the sea that were the territorial waters of coastal countries, whose governments had full latitude to introduce whatever standards they pleased. The problem mainly involved the high seas, where the principle of freedom traditionally prevailed. It was very soon realised that it was in everyone's interest to agree on a minimum of rules to be respected, for both signals and traffic. These came to form the "common law of the sea", covering rules for navigation, rescue and collisions [24].

· Foreign ships in port

In the early years of the century, every State laid down its own conditions for the control of ships in its ports. Three examples illustrate this regulatory and administrative diversity. In Britain, the 1906 Merchant Shipping Act officially applied loading and minimum loadline requirements to foreign ships. In France, the provisions of the 1907 Act on crews referred only to French ships, while those concerning surveys applied to both French and foreign vessels. The United States Seamen's Act of March 1915 applied to foreign ships sailing from American ports. But in practice, steamships not carrying passengers were exempted.

This range of provisions resulted in considerable uncertainty, for the navigational permits and seaworthiness certificates had no international validity. Confusion reigned, to the extent that ships visiting ports in several states were sometimes required to meet contradictory safety conditions.

· Regulation of competition

Maritime trade has always been subject to fierce international competition. Repeated maritime disasters gradually convinced national legislators that economic rivalries, particularly as regard fleet operation, could endanger safety and bring this form of transport irretrievably into disrepute. It was realised that only an agreement among States, laying down minimum standards to be met by a particular ship performing a particular service, could offer a satisfactory long-term solution.

One example is freeboard legislation. Two identical vessels, but of different nationalities, frequently come into competition on the same route. If one of them is more heavily loaded than the other, the shipowner will earn a higher profit, but will expose his ships to greater dangers, and a correspondingly lower level of safety. If the same freeboard is displayed on the hulls of both

ships, by means of a loadline, overloading will no longer be an acceptable commercial tactic. Internationally, the existence of a standard was more important than its content, for ultimately the intention was not to penalise states adopting strict regulation. It was also important to prevent less scrupulous countries from obtaining a competitive edge by introducing deliberately indulgent legislation[25].

Steps in Internationalisation

Accidents and major disasters encouraged States to cooperate in the search for safe, efficient maritime transport. This move towards internationalisation of the law took place in several stages. First came the uniformisation of local regulations, through bilateral treaties, agreements or understandings among the leading maritime nations. Next, these same nations were to hold international conferences, in order to set up genuinely universal rules. Finally, intergovernmental organisations were to take over and encourage the adoption of international instruments to regulate safety at sea and protection of the marine environment.

Diplomatic conferences and multilateral conventions

At the beginning of this century, the dogma of absolute freedom of competition reigned supreme. It was possible to build a ship more or less whatever way one liked, equip it with whatever instruments one liked, operate it according to whatever standards one liked, and sail it whatever way one liked on any seas. Only a few common navigational rules had emerged, following the holding of the first international conferences on the safety of maritime transport. On 28 July 1879, nineteen States adopted joint rules in London for an international signal code. On 1st September 1880, an international convention set the first rules for preventing collisions. On 28 July 1881 the first convention on health and safety for steam packet navigation was signed.

In 1889, a congress met in November in Washington DC, to draw up a proper code of the sea, covering rules on steering and sailing, lights and signals, and distress signals. This first major international maritime conference defined thirteen groups of regulatory principles, which were subsequently adopted and implemented by all the States, without giving rise to an official convention. The start of the 20th century saw the emergence of the first rules on wireless telegraphy, laid down by the Berlin Convention and rules of 3 November 1906. Two other basic conventions were signed in September 1910, one concerning collisions, the other lifesaving and assistance[26].

When the transatlantic liner Titanic sank on 14 April 1912 off Newfoundland, after colliding with an iceberg, the event was followed by a spectacular acceleration in the standard-setting process. This appalling disaster had an enormous impact on public opinion, and encouraged realisation of the need for collective safety procedures. By July 1912, a wireless telegraphy conference, held in London, made intercommunication systems and radio equipment on board ships compulsory. It also allocated certain wavelengths to ships and coastal stations, long-distance radiotelegrams and radiolighthouses. Its application was to be suspended during the First World War, but it came into force again in 1919.

The most important result of the loss of the Titanic was the first international conference on the safety of life at sea, held in London in January 1914 at the invitation of the British government. With great difficulty, this conference drafted an international agreement: the issue required a consensus which could be obtained only after interminable discussions on the various technical solutions proposed to reduce accidents. The first Convention on Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) was signed by only five states, but led to extensive application regulations in Britain, France, the United States and Scandinavia[27].

The standard-setting process spread internationally between the Wars. The 1920 conference on the International Union of Electrical Communications revised the rules of the 1912 convention on wireless telegraphy, and the principles of the SOLAS Convention. Two other conferences, one in Washington in 1927 and the other in Madrid in 1931, finalized international regulations on radiocommunications.

A second conference on the safety of human life at sea took place in London in 1929, where a new SOLAS Convention was adopted, containing some sixty articles on ship construction, lifesaving equipment, fire prevention and fire fighting, wireless telegraphy equipment, navigation aids and rules to prevent collisions.

On 23 October 1930, three important texts, drafted in Lisbon under the auspices of the League of Nations, completed regulations on signalling at sea. The first text concerned maritime signals, the second was about manned lightships, and the third dealt with the characteristics of lighthouses and radiobeacons. Another agreement, reached in Geneva on 13 May 1936, harmonised the existing buoy age systems.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, international conferences on safety at sea proceeded to amend existing texts. On 10 June 1947, the Oslo Convention introduced a new registered tonnage system.

In 1948, the British government invited all the States that had signed the SOLAS Convention to attend an international conference, in order to revise the provisions on safety of life at sea. A new version was adopted in June by twenty-seven States, and came into effect on 19 November 1952.

The emerging role of international organizations

One might be tempted to believe that international law on safety at sea was established in the first part of the 20th century through the efforts of international organisations. Several of them did try to harmonise national rules.

The Comité Maritime International (CMI), set up in Antwerp in 1897^[28], contributed to the work of several diplomatic conferences. This purely private body, which brought together maritime law associations in Western countries, took part directly in the establishment of several texts relating to safety: collision in the 1910 Brussels Convention, and assistance and salvage at sea in 1910.

Set up just after the First World War, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) fostered the introduction of specific regulations for working conditions at sea. In 1920, a convention was adopted on a minimum age for admission of employment as seamen on ships. In 1930, ILO also launched the first campaigns against flags of convenience.

Another organisation set up by the League of Nations and that played an important role in harmonising standards was the Temporary Transport and Communication Commission. It was responsible for the 1923 Geneva Convention on maritime port regimes. In London, a year later, two technical committees were set up within this agency, one to investigate the problems raised by unification of registered tonnage provisions, and the other to examine issues of maritime navigation, buoyage and lighting of coasts. These efforts culminated in the adoption of several international agreements at the Lisbon conference of 1930. The agency continued its work until 1939^[29].

But on the whole, initiatives taken by international organisations were rather limited in the early part of the century. The whole period was dominated by the worldwide maritime supremacy of the United Kingdom. For a long time, the British fleet was the largest in the world, exerting

considerable influence over principles and legal concepts[30]. London was the favoured venue for major diplomatic conferences. The British government, sole depository of the SOLAS Conventions, thereby had control over the revisions of 1929 and 1948. British practice in fact inspired much of the work of international legislators, as regards both the equipment of ships and the rules of navigation. Certain observers went so far as to assert that the United Kingdom actually made up for institutional shortcomings on the international scene.

The post-Second World War period witnessed a gradual decline in British power and influence. 1948 marked a decisive turning point in the maritime history of nations when, on 6 March, a convention was signed in Geneva, setting up the International Maritime Consultative Organisation (IMCO), which was to assume responsibility for safety issues. From the Fifties, there was an increase in the numbers of international bodies and various commissions which had the task of reducing accidents at sea. Thereupon began the age of organizations, whose importance and influence were to grow steadily until the present day.

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