

Satellite Meeting: Preserving our origins: Approaches to the organization, curation, and historiography of the record of national and international organizations in libraries, information, and documentation.

Date: 17-19 August 2023:

Location: Mundaneum, Mons, Belgium

IFLA in the International Arena before the Second World War: Evidence from the *Actes du Comité International des Bibliothèques*, and the Digitized League of Nations Archives

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Abstract:

*Did IFLA play a significant international role before the Second World War? This paper reports on an exploration of two sources of information on IFLA's international activities during 1928-1939: the proceedings of the annual meetings of the International Library Committee, and files relating to entities of the League of Nations that were concerned with libraries and bibliography. Accessing IFLA's proceedings, and finding relevant documents in the League of Nations archives turned out to be challenging. This paper is primarily about these sources, but offers some tentative findings. It appears that IFLA was more actively and productively engaged internationally than had thought, engaging particularly with the Committee of Library Experts of the League's International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation. Both the *Actes du Comité international des Bibliothèques* and the League of Nations archives hold a treasure trove of data for historians of IFLA, librarianship and documentation, and the international cultural and intellectual milieu during the inter-war period. This resource should be better utilized.*

Keywords: IFLA, League of Nations, International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation. Archives, international relations

Introduction

In 2027, we will celebrate the centenary of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. IFLA was founded in 1927 as the International Library and Bibliographical Committee. In its early years it has been dismissed as little more than a “gentleman’s club”,

which was only able to play a more significant international role after WW2, when UNESCO took an interest in IFLA and provided some support and guidance (Lor 2012).

Is that a correct assessment? This paper reports on an exploration of two sources of information on IFLA's international activities during 1928-1939: the proceedings of the annual meetings of the International Library Committee, and files relating to entities of the League of Nations that were concerned with libraries and bibliography. Accessing IFLA's proceedings, and finding relevant documents in the League of Nations archives turned out to be challenging. This paper is primarily about these sources, but offers some tentative findings.

IFLA and the *Actes*

The creation of the International Library and Bibliographical Committee in Edinburgh of 1927 and how in 1929 it became the International Federation of Library Associations (“and Institutions” was added later) has been described elsewhere (e.g. Guerrini and Speciale 2012). In its first decades, IFLA was generally known as the International Library Committee. The Committee consisted of a representative of each of the Federation's member associations (21 in 1929 and 41 in 1939) and met annually. It was both the engine room and the international face of IFLA.

The proceedings of IFLA's International Library Committee appeared annually as the *Actes du Comité International des Bibliothèques* (referred to below as the *Actes*). They were published in printed volumes. Some have been haphazardly digitized by the United Nations Archives in Geneva. However, the digitized volumes are difficult to find. I was unable to access all the *Actes* and had to supplement them with reports and correspondence found in the archives.

The *Actes* follow a basic sequence that was established in 1932:

- a group photo and list of delegates (evidence of how IFLA's gender and geographical representativeness evolved);
- flowery welcoming addresses;
- reports by the President and Secretary General;
- various *communications* by members and reports by subcommittees (evidence of IFLA's activities, concerns and international relationships in respect of matters such as international inter-library lending, customs tariffs, public libraries, training of librarians, national library statistics, exchanges of university theses, microfilming, standardisation, and prices of periodicals; lengthy discussions of these being reported in some detail);
- annual communications by representatives of the League of Nations and the International Institute of Documentation (IID) (a source of information on IFLA's international relations);
- country reports by delegates (potentially useful for historians of those countries);
- Annexes containing long reports (many of which should also be of interest to historians).

Paging through the *Actes*, I encountered many “pearls” – snippets and comments that bring librarianship and library personalities of the period to life.

The League of Nations and Intellectual Cooperation

To navigate through its complex archival fonds, researchers need some background on the structure of the League of Nations.

The League of Nations (*Société des Nations*) was founded in 1920 as an outcome of the Paris Peace Conference. Its purpose was to maintain world peace. Its main components were the Assembly (consisting of representatives of all the member nations), the Council (an executive body with permanent and elected members, similar to the UN's Security Council), and the Permanent Secretariat (the administrative unit with permanent staff, headed by the Secretary General, and based in Geneva). The Secretariat had eleven sections, each dealing with a portfolio of matters of concern to the League, a Registry, and a Library.

In 1922 the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation (referred to below as the ICIC) was added as an advisory organ to the League. This Committee of twelve members included intellectual giants such as Henri Bergson, Marie Curie, and Albert Einstein. Much like UNESCO today, it concerned itself with international collaboration in education, arts, culture, and science, including bibliography, documentation, and libraries. The ICIC was supervised by the International Bureaux and Intellectual Cooperation Section of the League of Nations Secretariat.

The structure of the League of Nations changed and grew more complex over time. Complexity was added when the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC) was set up in Paris at the expense of the French government, to serve as an executive organ for the ICIC. It was inaugurated in January 1926. It was often referred to as the "Paris Institute". Not being funded by the League gave it some autonomy, enabling it to maintain relations with member states independently of the Secretariat. It was also an instrument of French soft power. All its successive directors were French. In a study using social network analysis, Grandjean (2022) has traced the shifting balance of power between the ICIC in Geneva and the Paris Institute, a sort of cultural tug-of-war.

These relations affected the ICIC's relations with libraries. We can see this reflected in the archival fonds. The ICIC (Geneva), being itself a committee, established *subcommittees*, including one on Bibliography and Science. However, under a reform carried out in 1930, these were replaced by committees of experts. In this case, its work was taken over by an existing Committee of Library Experts (referred to here as the Expert Committee), which met at the Paris Institute. Closer study of its proceedings may throw more light on the relations between the ICIC and the Geneva Institute.

The League of Nations Archives

A project to digitize the League of Nations archives was completed by the United Nations Archives in Geneva in 2022. They are available online as part of the Total Digital Access to the League of Nations Archive (LONTAD) project (United Nations Archives in Geneva 2022). The UN Archives in Geneva have provided useful guides to these resources, including notes on the context, content and structure of the main fonds, that of the League of Nations Secretariat (<https://archives.ungeneva.org/league-of-nations-secretariat>). On the website there are also finding aids, and it is possible to chat or correspond with helpful archivists. The fonds can be searched online using simple and advanced searches and by following the fonds' hierarchy. However, due to the League's bilingual documentation, structural changes over

time, inconsistent naming of committees, and the archival principles of provenance and original order, I found finding specific information time-consuming.

IFLA's relations with the League of Nations

Here I can offer only a few observations on IFLA's international relations.

The head of the League of Nations Library, T.P. Sevensma, was allowed to serve as IFLA's Secretary, provided this did not entail costs, and that the word "Bibliography" be omitted from the name of the new organisation. Documents in the archives reveal the politics behind this.

Through Sevensma, IFLA was strategically embedded at the centre of the League of Nations. Significant overlap in the membership of key entities, especially the International Library Committee (IFLA) and the Expert Committee, favoured communication. The Expert Committee initially concerned itself with projects to facilitate scientific and scholarly communication, before evolving towards popularisation of science for the general public, notably through public libraries. There was much overlap between its work and that of IFLA.

A seminal meeting of the International Library Committee in 1930 was attended by the top officials of both the ICIC and the Paris Institute. They contributed significantly, sharing information, and helping to set IFLA's direction. The reports that were presented on the activities of the Expert Committee of the Paris Institute can be found in the *Actes*. However, during the 1930s, the ICIC's interest in IFLA declined. This is possibly due to financial constraints resulting from the Great Depression and the withdrawal of major countries from the League. The ICIC's Subcommittee for Science and Bibliography was abolished in 1930. The full Expert Committee survived through 1939, but less activity was reported.

Preliminary conclusions

IFLA was more actively and productively engaged internationally than I had expected, especially with the ICIC.

Both the *Actes* and the League of Nations archives hold a treasure trove of data for historians of IFLA, librarianship and documentation, and the international cultural and intellectual milieu during the inter-war period. This resource should be better utilized. In view of the approaching IFLA centenary, digitizing all the *Actes* as a set readily available to researchers would be a good start.

Acknowledgments

I thank Anne Korhonen and Louis Tákacs of IFLA Headquarters and Steven Witt of the Centre for Global Studies, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, for assisting in gaining access to archival resources.

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