The Sinuous Road towards Global Mathematics

Twenty-eight ICMs, two IMUs, and a moving web of international organizations

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Strasbourg, 27 September 2021
The calendar is like a metronome

Something happened here in Strasbourg 101 years ago.

It calls for being situated in the longer history of international cooperation in mathematics.
Norbert Schappacher

Framing Global Mathematics

The International Mathematical Union between Politics and Theorems

Let us walk through the book
Part I The Long Nineteenth Century that Made the IMU Possible: 1800–1918

1 Nationalism, Internationalism and the Sciences in the Long Nineteenth Century ..........................................................

1.1 Jobs and Journals ..........................................................

1.1.1 The Humboldt Brothers ..............................................

1.1.2 Adolphe Quetelet and Mathematical Statistics ..................

1.1.3 England ..............................................................

1.1.4 Paris and France ....................................................

1.1.5 Italy .................................................................

1.1.6 Gösta Mittag-Leffler ...................................................

1.1.7 A Woman Mathematician with International Connections ....

1.2 Nation Branding through Science ......................................

1.2.1 Chemical Elements ................................................

1.2.2 Nation, Culture, Science ...........................................

1.2.3 Nation and Mathematics ...........................................

1.3 Felix Klein, a Sample of Projects he was Involved in ...........

1.3.1 Attempts to Federate Pure and Applied Science .............

1.3.2 The Unlikely Resurrection of Scientific Academies as (Inter)National Agents of Science ........................................

1.3.3 The Encyclopedia of the Mathematical Sciences Including Their Applications ..........................

1.4 World Mathematics before World War I ............................

1.4.1 International Congresses ..........................................
I delegati dell'Associazione Internazionale delle Accademie (adunanze in Roma, 9-15 maggio 1910).

The first ICMs before the Great War have an independent history.

1897 Zürich
1900 Paris
1904 Heidelberg
1908 Rome
1912 Cambridge, UK
1916 Stockholm

For their first congress the mathematicians were careful to select a host country known for its attention to international causes, the most emblematic example being the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva founded in 1863. Hurwitz’s welcome speech at the 1897 ICM in Zürich avoided any allusion to national motives, insisting merely on the contrast between lonely work in the study and the exchange with colleagues.¹⁹⁰

Neither IAA nor another substitute of IMU was involved in organizing these ICMs. The torch was passed on from one organizing committee to the next.

An ICM was planned by Gösta Mittag-Leffler for Stockholm in 1916.
Two Chapters on upheavals: inside mathematics, and on the battlefields of the Great War

2 Unfimr Foundations
  2.1 Mathematics Meets Literature
      2.1.1 Mathematics and Name Worshipping
      2.1.2 Robert Musil
  2.2 Hermann Weyl’s Changing Attitudes to the Foundational Crisis
      2.2.1 The First Phase: Before the War
      2.2.2 The Second Phase: 1917–1918
      2.2.3 The Third Phase: After the War

3 World War I
  3.1 To the Civilized World!
  3.2 Intellectual Warfare
  3.3 Mathematic(ian)s during World War I
      3.3.1 Vito Volterra and Mauro Picone
  3.4 International Congresses during the Great War
1918 - 1928. A new structure for *Science International*. The first IMU

Part II  Mathematical Consolidation in Times of Tempest: 1919–1949

4  The first IMU: Triumph and Demise ........................................ 97
   4.1  The Framers of the Council, IRC ..................................... 98
       4.1.1  The First Scientific Unions within IRC; Preparing for IMU . 103
       4.2  UAI; League of Nations; ICIC ................................... 106
       4.3  Strasbourg ............................................................. 109
           4.3.1  Maurice Fréchet in Strasbourg .............................. 112
           4.3.2  The IMU Founded in Strasbourg ........................... 113
           4.3.3  The 1920 ICM in Strasbourg: “la grande manifestation patriotique et scientifique” .................................. 115
       4.4  The Waning Influence of IMU ..................................... 119
           4.4.1  John Charles Fields .............................................. 121
           4.4.2  “The Disagreeable Tempest which Raged at Toronto” ...... 123
           4.4.3  Bologna and the Marginalization of IMU .................. 128
Two of the Big Five — with George Hale, Georges Lecointe, and Arthur Schuster — who created the IRC starting in 1918.

Source: Bibliothèque IRMA Strasbourg
1918 - 1920 The new *International Research Council IRC*

- First inter-Allied meeting in October 1918. Very efficient setup of a new umbrella organization for international scientific unions.

- The approach is top-down: First the IRC; Then the Scientific Unions, with statutes conformal to those of the IRC (July 1919, Brussels).

- Two motivations, represented by the two mathematicians shown:
  
  1. taking control by excluding the “central powers”, in particular Germany;

  2. perpetuating state financed, war related applied research funding into the post-war period: lift “National Research Councils” that had been created for instance in the US and in Italy to the international level.

- Neutral states (such as Sweden or The Netherlands) were invited only later.

- Everything was done very quickly, not to lose control of the international scene in times of peace. This may be the reason for the “sunset clause” in the statutes.
Les académiciens français et les Unions

Cinq Unions dont le Bureau est constitué.

Les présidents :
- UAI: B. Baillaud (F)
- UGGI: Ch. Lallemand (F)
- UICPA: Ch. Moureu (F)
- URSI: Général G. Ferrié (F)
- UISB: Y. Delage (F)

Cas de l’UAI
- 32 commissions, 287 postes
- 21 français pour 69 postes soit
- 24% des postes dont
- 50 postes pour des académiciens (72%)
- 6 postes de présidence
- 25 postes pour Deslandres et Bigourdan

Avec Baillaud et Hamy : 54% des postes
Other union projects were also discussed in Brussels, but could not be finalized in 1919. This was the case in particular for physics—the physicists were not sufficiently advanced in their plans to even propose a provisional executive committee in Brussels—and for mathematics. The following account of the mathematicians’ discussion in Brussels can be found in the official report about the Constitutive Assembly of IRC.23

D. International Union of Mathematicians.
The sessions are chaired by Mr. de la Vallée Poussin.24
Mr. De Donder25 acts as secretary.
The assembly accepts the proposed statutes unanimously…
The assembly expresses the wish to see an International Congress of Mathematicians organized in September 1920; M. Koenigs26 hopes that it will be possible to hold this Congress in Strasbourg. This proposal meets with unanimous consent.
... the assembly expresses the wish that the authors of mathematical papers or treatises send, right after the publication of their works, abstracts of these to an organism whose task it will be to centralize and coordinate all bibliographical abstracts; this organism will be lodged in Paris, or in another scientific centre, and will be linked as far as possible to an existing similar agency.
The delegates present [at the sessions discussing the project of an IMU] form the Provisional Committee of the International Union of Mathematicians. Its Executive Committee consists of:

**Honorary Presidents:** Mr. H. Lamb27, E. Picard and V. Volterra;
**President:** Mr. de la Vallée Poussin;
**Vice-President:** Mr. W.H. Young28;
**Secretaries:** Mr. de Donder, Koenigs, Petrovich29, and Reina30.
The remaining delegates in the Provisional Committee are: Mr. Demoulin31, de Ruyts32, Glaisher33, Parenty34, Stuyvaert35.
“According to the wish expressed in Brussels [in 1919] by the IMU, the National Committee has actively engaged in organizing the International Congress, which …. is to open in Strasbourg on 22 September 1920 …”

So the UMI kind of existed already, when it was officially founded on Monday, 20 Sep 1920.
CONGRÈS INTERNATIONAL DES MATHÉMATICIENS

SOUS LE HAUT PATRONAGE

de l'Académie des Sciences
du Ministère de l'Instruction Publique
et du Commissariat Général d'Alsace-Lorraine

Strasbourg, le 1er Juillet 1920.

MONSIEUR,

Le Ministère de l'Instruction Publique et le Comité National Français ont l'honneur de vous inviter à faire partie du Comité d'Organisation du Congrès International des Mathématiciens, qui se tiendra à Strasbourg du 22 au 30 septembre prochain.

Nous vous serions très reconnaissants de bien vouloir assister à la première Série Plénière du Comité, qui aura lieu au Palais de l'Université de Strasbourg (1er étage, Salle A, contiguë à la grande Salle des Fêtes) le samedi 10 juillet, à 3 h. 1/2 de l'après-midi.


Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de nos sentiments les plus distingués.

E. PICARD,
Secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie des Sciences,
Président du Comité National Français des Mathématiciens.

Pour le Comité du Congrès :

H. VILLAT,
Professeur à la Faculté des Sciences de Strasbourg.
11, rue du Maréchal-Petain (Strasbourg).

Monsieur Gerock, Bibliothécaire de l'Université.
Plan of this building distributed to the participants of the 1920 ICM

Source: BNUS Strasbourg
1918 - 1928. A new structure for *Science International*. The first IMU

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**Part II Mathematical Consolidation in Times of Tempest: 1919–1949**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>The first IMU: Triumph and Demise</strong></td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>The Framers of the Council, IRC</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1</td>
<td>The First Scientific Unions within IRC; Preparing for IMU</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>UAI; League of Nations; ICIC</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Strasbourg</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1</td>
<td>Maurice Fréchet in Strasbourg</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2</td>
<td>The IMU Founded in Strasbourg</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3</td>
<td>The 1920 ICM in Strasbourg: “la grande manifestation patriotique et scientifique”</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>The Waning Influence of IMU</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1</td>
<td>John Charles Fields</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2</td>
<td>“The Disagreeable Tempest which Raged at Toronto”</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.3</td>
<td>Bologna and the Marginalization of IMU</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A lecture from the Strasbourg ICM which was not reproduced in the Proceedings

Prof. [Pierre Ernest] Weiss, the director of the Strasbourg Institute of Physics, gave an account of the methods of soundranging in use in the French Army during the war. The method normally employed was the same as that in use in the British Army. A useful alternative was the méthode à courtes bases, in which six or more microphones were placed in pairs. The microphones of each pair were about a hundred metres apart, so that the gun locus became a straight line (asymptote), and at once gave the direction of the hostile gun. The installation was very simple, and could be made in an hour, while single sets of observations could be reduced and reported in a minute. This method was used, not for the accurate location of gun emplacements, but for determining quickly which one of the known hostile batteries was in action. Guns were also successfully located by observations of the onde de choque. The normals to this wave-surface determine a caustic which is nearly constant in form for high-velocity shells. To locate the gun emplacement, a standard caustic drawn on tracing-paper was fitted by trial to the normals determined by the instruments. This method was used when atmospheric conditions made the spherical wave imperceptible, and, although less accurate, it gave very good results. A case was quoted where 80 per cent. of the hostile emplacements were correctly located solely by ondes de choque.82

Before the war, Pierre Weiss had established his own institute on magnetic research at the Zürich Polytechnique; he was now about to do the same in Strasbourg.83 Incidentally, since his days at ENS, Pierre Weiss was a close friend of Élie Cartan who attended the ICM and gave a lecture. Cartan was accompanied by his wife and four children, among them his eldest son Henri Cartan (1904–2008), who would start teaching regularly at Strasbourg University in 1931, and marry Pierre Weiss’s daughter Nicole in 1935.
From the list of participants of the Strasbourg ICM:

**Cartan (E.), professeur à la Sorbonne, 4, avenue de Montespan, Le Chesnay (Seine-et-Oise).**
Mme Cartan, Mlle Cartan;
MM. Jean, Louis, Henri Cartan.

Elie Cartan was a close friend of Pierre Weiss. His eldest son Henri was born in 1904.
The last International Mathematical Congress before the war had taken place in England in 1912, at Cambridge. The congress which was to have taken place in 1916 was clearly impossible and was allowed to go by the board. The next one, in 1920, did not find any adequate machinery established for its organization. France decided to step into the gap and celebrate an international congress in the newly re-Gallicized city of Strasbourg and at its university, now French. This had become the second university of France and the only provincial university with a great tradition of its own.

In many ways this was an unfortunate decision. It was one which later led me to regret my little share in sanctioning the meeting by my presence. The Germans were excluded as a sort of punitive measure. In my mature, considered opinion, punitive measures are out of place in international scientific relations. Perhaps it would have been impossible to hold a truly international meeting for another couple of years, but this delay would have been preferable to what actually did take place, the nationalization of a truly international institution. All that I can say for myself is that I was young and that I did not feel myself in a position of direct personal responsibility for the course taken by international science.\textsuperscript{76}

This a telling example of what the first IMU would represent in hindsight.
The first IMU

Part II  Mathematical Consolidation in Times of Tempest: 1919–1949

4  The first IMU: Triumph and Demise ........................................... 97
  4.1  The Framers of the Council, IRC ........................................... 98
      4.1.1 The First Scientific Unions within IRC; Preparing for IMU . 103
  4.2  UAI; League of Nations; ICIC ............................................. 106
  4.3  Strasbourg ................................................................. 109
      4.3.1 Maurice Fréchet in Strasbourg ..................................... 112
      4.3.2 The IMU Founded in Strasbourg .................................... 113
      4.3.3 The 1920 ICM in Strasbourg: “la grande manifestation patriotique et scientifique” ........................................... 115
  4.4  The Waning Influence of IMU .............................................. 119
      4.4.1 John Charles Fields ................................................... 121
      4.4.2 “The Disagreeable Tempest which Raged at Toronto” ........ 123
      4.4.3 Bologna and the Marginalization of IMU ........................... 128
From Edwin B. Wilson’s letter to Émile Picard, 19 Dec 1924, summing up his feelings after the Toronto ICM of 1924

Now as I see it the only hope of getting back to reasonably universal and cordial relations among scientific men lies in our exercising a great deal of good taste and charity and keeping out of political entanglements. In a certain sense the International Research Council is political. In this country our state department pays our dues and it would not do so if there were no political aspect to the organization of the International Research Council. I should expect that this political aspect would enable certain persons in power to continue the exclusion of the Germans if they so determined and thereby to delay the resumption first of pleasant scientific cooperation between the various groups of scientists in this country with the French on one hand and the Germans on the other, and further delay the gradual re-establishment of amicable scientific relationship between the French and Germans. I personally regard the organization of the International Research Council as possibly, though not surely, a bad thing for future international cooperation among scientific people. I personally believe that when relations between two parties are strained it is best to have nothing which will add to the group consciousness of either party and to have all arrangements so thoroughly informal and individual that each person of whatever nation comes not as a representative in any way of his nationality but as a scientist with his scientific interests. And I venture to forecast that in those fields such as physics where we have no international organization under the International Research Council we may attain to truly international congresses earlier than in those branches such as mathematics where there is such an organization.
The 1928 ICM at Bologna

Pincherle managed to mount the 1928 ICM without the IMU, inviting German mathematicians, because he had the backing of Mussolini.

After the 1928 Congress the IMU was in agony.

The definite “liquidation” followed in 1932.

The IMU was the only International Scientific Union which did not manage to adapt to the historical development of the 1920s, and transform into a Union of ICSU after the 1932 mutation of IRC into ICSU.

Salvatore Pincherle
IMU President & Organizer of the 1928 ICM in Bologna
There are many more interesting things to relate about the international development of the mathematical profession between the two World Wars than the hapless story of the first IMU.

5  Philanthropic Capital for Mathematics ........................................ 137
5.1 The Rockefeller Philanthropies ................................................ 138
5.2 The Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton .............................. 145

6  Mathematical Consolidation and Unification in the 1930s .......... 151
6.1 Emmy Noether’s Legacy ............................................................ 155
   6.1.1 What is ‘Modern’ about ‘Modern Algebra’? ...................... 156
   6.1.2 Emmy Noether’s *Auffassung* and its Influence ................ 162
   6.1.3 Emmy Noether’s International Network .............................. 165
6.2 Encounters, Workshops and Congresses in the 1930s ............... 168
   6.2.1 Specialized Conferences ................................................. 168
   6.2.2 ICMs of the Thirties ...................................................... 172
6.3 Books, Journals; *Zentralblatt* and *Mathematical Reviews* ... 178
   6.3.1 Books ............................................................................. 178
   6.3.2 Journals and Politics ....................................................... 180
   6.3.3 Review Journals and Politics .......................................... 183
6.4 Three Journeys to the West ..................................................... 185

1932 Zürich!
Part III  Seventy Years of Globalization, 1950–2020

8  Seventy Years, Eighteen ICMs, and One IMU
8.1  A new IMU and an ICM in Another World
   8.1.1  United Nations, International Tribunals
   8.1.2  UNESCO and ICSU
   8.1.3  The New IMU
   8.1.4  Gathering “a Very Large Part of the Mathematical World”
8.2  IMU Time Intervals
   8.2.3  New Horizons: 1982/3–1990
   8.2.4  Sudden Openness: 1994–2002
   8.2.5  Global Reach from a new Homebase: 2006–2018
8.3  A World Wide Web of Institutes

9  ICMI, The Resilient Nucleus of IMU
Twice ~60 years of ICMs

Organized without IMU
1897 Zürich
1900 Paris
1904 Heidelberg
1908 Rome
1912 Cambridge, UK
1916 Stockholm

First IMU imposes exclusion
1920 Strasbourg
1924 Toronto

1928 Bologna
1932 Zürich
1936 Oslo

Second IMU in creation or existence
1950 Cambridge, Massachusetts
1954 Amsterdam
1958 Edinburgh

The coming together of ICMs and IMU
1962 Stockholm
1966 Moscow
1970 Nice
1974 Vancouver
1978 Helsinki
1982/3 Warsaw
1986 Berkeley
1990 Kyoto
1994 Zürich
1998 Berlin
2002 Beijing
2006 Madrid
2010 Hyderabad
2014 Seoul
2018 Rio de Janeiro
What lessons were there to be learned from the failure of the old IMU?

Olli Lehto

**Mathematics Without Borders**

A History of the International Mathematical Union

With 55 Illustrations

1998

Looking at Olli Lehto’s book (whose title has been chosen as the motto for today’s event), many have taken as the basic lesson the principle:

Avoid exclusion on the basis of national origin.

And this line of conduct has been taken to be synonymous to “being apolitical”.

These were of course not the first interferences of politics with the IMU, whose birth was overshadowed by the Cold War.
From a letter of Israel Halperin to Jacques-Louis Lions 7 May 1982

As is well known, the professor of mathematics J.L. Massera has been tortured and then held a prisoner in Uruguay in spite of actions to obtain his freedom by thousands of individual scientists and scientific societies over six years. Some months ago, an international Campaign was started by Professors Henri Cartan of France and Israel Halperin of Canada to persuade the Government of Uruguay that their image in the world would suffer more damage by continued imprisonment of Prof. Massera than by anything he might say if he were released.

This International Campaign now has the formal support of the Mathematical Societies of Canada, France, Yugoslavia, Italy, Denmark and Czechoslovakia. We anticipate that this list will grow as other Mathematical Societies can arrange to put the question to their memberships.

International Campaign-Massera would like to ask the IMU to take one or more of the following actions:

1. Issue a public statement expressing the wish that Prof. Massera be allowed to go immediately to France or Italy, in both of which countries he has standing invitations.

2. Recommend to adhering National Organizations and National Committees of Mathematics that they in turn take such action as they find appropriate to obtain the release of Professor Massera.

I appreciate that some voices will be raised in opposition to this request on the grounds that the IMU is not authorised to get involved in politics. But it should be clear to all that this is a question of simple humanity and does not involve political attitudes or influence. I imagine that we would all agree that if the IMU had at a certain point in time protested the inhuman treatment of Banach and many other scientists that no one to-day would criticise that action.
The IMU has consistently abstained from throwing its considerable reputation behind such causes or campaigns.

“The E.C. felt that even though as individuals the members are very much concerned with human rights IMU as an organization should refer such matters to ICSU.”

Letter Lehto to Rosenzweig, 26 May 1987

Today the reference would be to the Committee for Freedom and Responsibility in the Conduct of Science (CFRS) of the ISC, which was set up with a new remit in 2005, “which covers not only the special rights of scientists but also the special responsibilities that are concomitant to those rights.”
# The Last Chapter

10 Framing Mathematical Excellence ................................................................. 263
  10.1 The Infrastructure of IMU ................................................................. 263
    10.1.1 The Committee for Electronic Information and Communication (CEIC) ................................................................. 265
  10.1.2 Women in Mathematics ................................................................. 268
  10.1.3 The Commission for Developing Countries (CDC) ................................................................. 278
  10.1.4 The International Commission on the History of Mathematics (ICHM) ................................................................. 282
  10.2 Framing ICMs ....................................................................................... 284
  10.3 The Database ....................................................................................... 287
  10.4 The Cupola of the ICMs ....................................................................... 290
    10.4.1 Parts of the mathematical world ......................................................... 290
    10.4.2 Institutions of the Cupola ................................................................. 299
  10.5 Featuring Domains of Mathematics in Plenary Lectures ................................................................. 312
Sehr geehrte Frau Dr. Dick,

Besten Dank für die Zusendung Ihres sehr interessanten Aufsatzes "Die Mathematik und die Mädchen".


Fig. 10.1 First page of Van der Waerden’s letter. Distribution of ‘talent for mathematics and physics’ among all students, resp. female students.

Source: ETH Archive, Zürich / Auguste Dick Legacy, Vienna; thanks to R. Siegmund-Schultze for the Vienna copy with drawings.
Sections 10.3 - 10.5 exploit a quantitative analysis of ICM distinctions, which today have a considerable career impact, for the period 1950 - 2018, worked out by Birgit PETRI, and partly based on data graciously provided by Zentralblatt.
Geographic distribution of our total population (big charts), resp. of the subpopulation of plenary speakers (small charts), according to countries of origin.
Geographic distribution of our total population (big charts), resp. of the subpopulation of plenary speakers (small charts), according to professional affiliation.
Institutions employing exceptionally many mathematicians that play distinguished roles at the ICMs of a given period.

2 example periods
1949 - 2020

What kind of a filter does the selection of plenary speakers amount to in terms of the major domains of mathematics.
Since January 2011, the Secretariat of the International Mathematical Union is permanently based in Berlin, Germany. Under the supervision of the IMU Executive Committee, the Secretariat runs IMU’s day-to-day business and provides support for many IMU operations, including administrative assistance for the International Commission on Mathematical Instruction (ICMI) and the Commission for Developing Countries (CDC). The IMU Secretariat also hosts the IMU archive.

Today the IMU counts 87 members
The success of the IMU is the result of the work and interaction of many dedicated colleagues.