

Central Europe and the Making of International Intellectual Cooperation

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This paper shows how the Central European case shaped the making of the League's intellectual cooperation programme after World War I and the future character of international cooperation in education, the sciences and culture. Before World War I, the intellectual internationalisation movement limited itself to science and scholarship and only rarely relied on government support. After the war the League of Nations laid the foundations for a new mode of international intellectual cooperation that transgressed the narrow academic field and included action in non-academic agendas such as the arts, letters, film, libraries, archives and museums. The foundation for this new mode of international intellectual governance was laid by the Geneva-based International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation. ICIC established itself 100 years ago, in 1922, as a non-governmental agency with the aim of advising the League of Nations on the precarious state of intellectual work and intellectual cooperation in various countries and the improvement of the tools of cooperation at the international level. It won the support of the League Council and established itself as a broker between the League, individual states, and their leading intellectual actors. The successor states of the former Habsburg lands and beyond proved to be an appropriate arena for the ICIC's initial operation. It noticed that in Central Europe intellectual life was most at peril in the wake of World War I. It recognised in particular that the economic crisis had put intellectual workers in dire straits and that these workers were in urgent need of assistance. In this paper it is argued that the practical experience gained by ICIC in the Central European region has shaped the future form of international intellectual cooperation. In particular, ICIC's initial operation in this area helped to build up (1) its capacity and tools for operation, (2) its later scope of action, and which (3) paved the way for the strategies UNESCO would adopt after 1945.

From 1922 onwards, ICIC undertook comprehensive inquiries in the twelve nation states which had been newly established between the Baltic and the Aegean Sea on the territories of the dissolved empires. To gather information, it encouraged local activists and institutions to set up the first national sub-committees in the former Habsburg lands. Their surveys show that the local informants not only evaluated the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire differently, but they also developed different views on the form and scope of international assistance for intellectual workers they expected from the League of Nations: In the new Republic of Austria intellectual life had suffered the most as a result of the war. The new state had inherited most of the actors and the infrastructure of the fully developed intellectual life of the former empire. However, due to the dismal financial situation of the state, the cultural institutions and the institutions of higher learning were on the verge of closure. At the same time, the intellectual elites were faced with the trauma of the disintegration of a centuries-old empire, which had demonstrated an astonishing power of integration in the age of nationalism. The activists of the Austrian national committee – the *Landeskomitee für geistige Zusammenarbeit* – hoped for not only moral support, but also financial aid, which failed to materialize and immediately made the League's activities appear contradictory. The League's harsh economic recovery programme for Austria paid no regard to the ICIC's objective of restoring cultural life. It rather resulted in the dismissal of thousands of academic officials from public service in Austrian universities, museums and libraries. The rigorous stabilization policy of the League by its Commissioner-General of Austrian Finances and the spreading of message of success, although the state of intellectual workers had not improved at all, disillusioned the Austrian activists of intellectual cooperation with the League's policy. The head of the national sub-committee in Vienna, the renowned historian Alfons Dopsch, in a private letter to another Viennese activist assessed the League's policy of intellectual cooperation as "completely worthless for us."

In contrast to the ambivalent attitude of Austrian activists, the ICIC policy seemed met with greater approval in the other successor states of the Habsburg Empire. Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Poland were founding members of the League, Austria joined in 1920, Hungary in 1922. Austria and Hungary had been defeated in the First World War. Their intellectual and political elites had to overcome the trauma of losing an empire dominated by their respective people. In contrast, Polish, Yugoslav and Czechoslovak intellectual elites celebrated national independency from empires that had more or less oppressed their Slavic population as a triumph. The different views on the dissolved empire left traces in the respective approach to the League of Nations: The Austrian international activist Alfons Dopsch had in mind the unprotected cultural and unprovided intellectual heritage, for the protection of which he sought support. The Polish activist Oskar Halecki, also a historian and Secretary of ICIC, who had been entrusted with an enquiry in the successor states of the former empires, saw the advantages of the new nation states for intellectual development. Since the “majority [of the new states] owed their independence to the recent war”, Halecki pointed out in his report to ICIC that intellectual life in the Central European states had undergone an “extraordinary development (creation of new universities, learned societies, research institutions, libraries, etc.)” He noticed a spirit of optimism and he noted that despite the economic crisis and the lack of financial resources the development of intellectual life in these countries “would suffice to prove that European civilisation was by no means condemned to death.” (ICIC. Minutes of the Second Session, 26.7–2.8.1923) As a matter of fact, new institutions were established in several newly established countries (except the Republic of Austria).

Both Dopsch and Halecki were well aware of the contrasting post-war experiences, the one in a loser state, the other in a victorious state. The contrasts manifested themselves in their demands and actions: Dopsch expected compensation for the cultural sector in the face of the League's harsh economic recovery programme for Austria. The young Republic of Austria had to administer the fully developed cultural and intellectual heritage of a dissolved Empire. Its actors and institutions needed to be rescued via external funding. In contrast, the victorious states of Central Europe which had suffered suppression of national scientific and cultural activism in former empires at the “borderlands of Western civilisation”, as Halecki would later call it, strove not so much for financial support for the preservation of the non-existing cultural heritage, but for intellectual assistance. Intellectual cooperation “with the great western countries” by the exchange of scholars and publications would allow Central European countries “to come out of their isolation”. Since these countries did not request pecuniary, but intellectual assistance, Halecki promoted the idea of the establishment of national committees in the economically more favoured Western countries which could help the new countries to escape from isolation through the exchange of scholars and books.

According to this, in 1923 ICIC drew up “a systematic scheme of action”, which heralded a new era in international intellectual cooperation. The foundation of this scheme was twofold: the formation of national committees in countries whose intellectual life has been less severely affected by the postwar-crisis, and the raising of funds. The new League scheme was ultimately approved by the League Council in December 1923. In January 1924, the general-secretary of the League, Eric Drummond, asked the governments of the member states “to be good enough to consider the possibility of forming a national committee in your country [...], and to lend moral and financial support to this national committee when it has been formed.” (League of Nations. Secretary-General. Draft letter to the Governments, 2 January 1924) Furthermore, the Geneva-based ICIC was authorized to “receive [funds] from any institution or private persons interested in the work”, funds destined for the purpose of saving international intellectual life and cooperation (League of Nations. Secretary-General. Draft letter to the Governments, 2 January 1924). The national committees, for which the sub-committees in Central Europe served as a role model, should act as “intermediaries” within their respective countries and ICIC. They should assist ICIC in the enquiry on the conditions of intellectual life, and they were called to transmit requests of intellectual workers and institutions in their respective countries to ICIC or to other national committees (ICIC. Minutes of the Third Session, 5.12.–8.12.1923). New national committees were subsequently formed in beneficiary countries of Europe (e. g. Belgium, France, Norway, Switzerland) and beyond (e. g. Australia, Brazil, Japan, USA). Finally, an appeal was issued on behalf of the national committees.

Starting in the mid 1920s the scope of ICIC's primary activity – the initiation of cross-border intellectual cooperation – had limited itself to the field of science and scholarship, which had been the main object of institutionalized international cooperation from the nineteenth century onwards. ICIC had declared itself competent for academic issues. It consisted of 12 representatives of the academic world and it carried out its work within three sub-committees for bibliography, inter-university relations and intellectual property.

The drafting of the charter of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, which was intended to serve as the executive body of ICIC, based on French government support and established in Paris, opened up the possibility to include a new agenda: culture and cultural heritage, in particular the field of arts and letters, for which ICIC declared itself and the new institute competent in 1925. Although the idea of including cross-border culture into international cooperation was implemented only after the opening of the new International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation in Paris, it was not new: Since the Austrian activists had great interest to inform the European public of the unprotected cultural property and endangered cultural life, they had worked relentlessly to convince the League and ICIC of a comprehensive approach. The Austrian national committee included representatives from both the academic and cultural world from the outset. However, it is not clear yet in how far internationalization of cultural affairs was a result of the ongoing Austrian requests. The International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation opened in 1926 and worked on a wide range of academic and non-academic subjects including international issues relating to music, literature and the arts as well as international relations between museums. In the same year, the IIC established an International Museums Office (Office international des musées). Furthermore, in 1928, the International Educational Cinematographic Institute (IECE)—also part of the League—was founded in Rome. This shift in international intellectual cooperation, which took place in the mid-1920s, paved the way for the strategy UNESCO would adopt after 1945.