

Academic Refugees and Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations

Jan Stöckmann, Helmut-Schmidt-Universität Hamburg, Germany.

Stöckmann Jan. 2022. "Academic Refugees and Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations". *Centenary of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations*. Geneva, 63-66. <https://intellectualcooperation.org/stockmann-2022>

Introduction

In December 1935, the League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, James G. McDonald, resigned in protest of the latest wave of persecution in Germany and the unwillingness of the international community to welcome refugees. Humanitarian assistance was a "political function" which belonged to the League itself, McDonald concluded after little more than two years of service.⁵³ That insight was just as true for the work of the League's bodies for intellectual cooperation as they struggled to provide relief to refugee academics in the 1930s. Set up in the spirit of liberal internationalism after the First World War, the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) in Geneva and the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC) in Paris were unable to turn their ambitions into practical support for the most vulnerable members of their community. Why was it so difficult to help academic refugees?

On the one hand, the League lacked support from national governments, as McDonald lamented in his letter. But there was also a degree of overconfidence in prominently staffed committees which distracted from the substantial task of saving lives. Geneva bureaucrats seemed curiously removed from the realities of cultural life in a dictatorship, and they had underestimated the political nature of humanitarian assistance. More generally, then, the ICIC and IIIC serve as examples of how the international community grappled with the politicisation of seemingly technical questions of international life. Existing historiography on intellectual cooperation has rarely considered the question of refugee academics.⁵⁴ There are, however, excellent studies on the High Commission as well as the various private organisations, such as the Academic Assistance Council in Britain, and the reception of refugee academics abroad.⁵⁵

This paper looks at academic refugees from the perspective of the League in order to understand how international organisations dealt with a specific humanitarian question within a larger political conflict. First, it surveys the institutional setting in the early 1930s. It then illustrates the realities of refugee appeals and showcases efforts for relief by drawing on examples from the archives of the League and private philanthropic organisations. Finally, it contextualises the problem of refugee academics within the history of intellectual cooperation during the inter-war period.

⁵³ James G. McDonald, Letter of Resignation, 27 December 1935, League of Nations Archives, C1611-508-07.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Daniel Laqua, "Transnational intellectual cooperation, the League of Nations, and the problem of order", *Journal of Global History* 6:2 (2011); Jo-Anne Pemberton, "The Changing Shape of Intellectual Cooperation: From the League of Nations to UNESCO", *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 58:1 (2012); Jean-Jacques Renoliet, *L'UNESCO oubliée: La Société des Nations et la coopération intellectuelle (1919–1946)* (Paris, 1999).

⁵⁵ On the High Commission, see Greg Burgess, *The League of Nations and the Refugees from Nazi Germany: James G. MacDonald and Hitler's Victims* (London, 2016) and Monty Noam Penkower, 'Honorable Failures against Nazi Germany: McDonald's Letter of Resignation and the Petition in its Support', *Modern Judaism* 30:3 (2010). On the Academic Assistance Council, see Michael Cox, "His finest hour": William Beveridge and the Academic Assistance Council', *LSE Blog* (28 April 2021), available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsehistory/2021/04/28/his-finest-hour-william-beveridge-and-academic-assistance-council/> [accessed 15-02-2022]; and David Zimmerman, "The Society for the Protection of Science and Learning and the Politicisation of British Science in the 1930s", *Minerva* 44:1 (2006), pp. 25–45. On the reception of refugee academics abroad, see Christian Fleck, *Etablierung in der Fremde. Vertriebene Wissenschaftler in den USA nach 1933* (Frankfurt a. M., 2015); and Marjorie Lamberti, "The Reception of Refugee Scholars from Nazi Germany in America: Philanthropy and Social Change in Higher Education", *Jewish Social Studies* 12:3 (2006).

1 Institutional Setting: How did the League of Nations deal with academics fleeing Nazi Germany?

While the Covenant did not originally provide for a refugee organisation, the League of Nations soon faced the problem of repatriating prisoners of war as well as rescuing people from the 1921 Russian famine. In August 1921, the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen was appointed High Commissioner for Refugees. A committed humanitarian and internationalist, Nansen introduced a passport for stateless people which helped to resettle half a million people and earned him a Nobel Peace Prize. The initial conference establishing the Nansen passport in July 1922 was followed by several international arrangements for Russian, Armenian, and Assyrian refugees in the first half of the 1920s. After Nansen's death in 1930, his activities were taken up by the Nansen International Office for Refugees, though it never turned into a general agency for all types of refugees.

Meanwhile, the ICIC had taken up its work in Geneva, including studies on intellectual property rights, bibliographical questions, and the conditions of “intellectual workers”.⁵⁶ In August 1923, the ICIC adopted a resolution “concerning the organisation of relief for the intellectuals among the Russian emigrants”, which was supposed to coordinate the relief work already pursued by private bodies, though it did not offer any direct help.⁵⁷ Nor did any other ICIC and IIC activities address the hardship of refugee academics. Although the IIC operated more effectively from 1931, its activities remained within a relatively narrow scope of high-level cultural exchange. The majority of its work consisted of reports and studies written by a small group of experts for an equally small group of intellectuals and international bureaucrats. It was deliberately elitist and did not show much concern for mass problems, even in Europe.⁵⁸ In 1934, IIC director Henri Bonnet deplored the “uncertainty of the future”, but he was convinced that international cooperation was actually gaining public support.⁵⁹

Intellectual cooperation was supposed to be “disinterested” in the sense that it did not privilege certain political ideas over others.⁶⁰ This created the illusion of technical cooperation being able to settle problems that had fundamentally political roots. In the case of 1930s refugees, it meant that High Commissioner McDonald had “no wish to examine the reasons why these people have left their country”.⁶¹ That disinterest would soon become tragic.

2 Appeals for Help and Efforts for Relief: Who asked for help and what did the League do?

From the spring of 1933, the IIC started receiving appeals from individual refugees as well as refugee organisations, most notably the Geneva Comité international pour le placement des intellectuels réfugiés, the Academic Assistance Council in London, and its American counterpart, the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German Scholars. Some asked for financial support or jobs, others wanted the IIC to press the League of Nations for more humanitarian action. In most cases, IIC director Bonnet had to disappoint. He promised to spread the word among his network, but given the number of requests he could do nothing else.⁶² Instead, private relief organisations took over the work of the League. By April 1934, High Commissioner McDonald had effectively outsourced the registration of displaced German scholars to the Academic Assistance Council.⁶³

⁵⁶ Léon Bourgeois, *L'Oeuvre de la Société des Nations* (Paris, 1923), p. 410; Daniel Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 203–8.

⁵⁷ ICIC, ‘Resolutions concerning the organisation of relief for the intellectuals among the Russian emigrants adopted by the Committee’, 1 August 1923, Refugees Mixed Archival Group (Nansen Fonds), R1724/45/29932/13953.

⁵⁸ Jan Kolasa, *International Intellectual Cooperation: The League Experience and the Beginnings of UNESCO* (Wrocław, 1962), pp. 54, 165.

⁵⁹ Jean-Jacques Renoliet, *L'UNESCO oubliée: La Société des Nations et la coopération intellectuelle (1919–1946)* (Paris, 1999), pp. 297–301.

⁶⁰ International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIC), *The State and Economic Life* (Paris, 1934), p. xiii.

⁶¹ Greg Burgess, *The League of Nations and the Refugees from Nazi Germany: James G. MacDonald and Hitler's Victims* (London, 2016), p. 43 (citing Statement of James G. McDonald, 5 December 1933, C.1612, League of Nations Archives, Geneva).

⁶² Henri Bonnet to Walter Adams, 23 September 1933, AG1 IICI-B-IV-44, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

⁶³ Walter Adams, Circular Letter, 3 April 1934, AG1 IICI-B-IV-44, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

IIC records show direct interaction with seven individuals seeking help from 1933 to 1937, including the Social Democrat librarian Klaus Berger, the Jewish criminologist Hermann Mannheim, and the botanist Theodor Philipp Haas. As a ‘non-Aryan’, Haas had been dismissed from his role as a plant taxonomist at the Munich Botanical Museum. He contacted the IIC in March 1937 seeking employment abroad, but was referred to private relief organisations.⁶⁴ In November 1938, he was arrested and sent to Dachau. Released under the condition of leaving the country, he was able to emigrate to the United States in 1940 with the help of the Society of Friends (Quakers) and eventually found a position at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia. He was grateful for his new life in the United States, but he was deeply saddened by the death of his elderly mother whom he had to leave behind in Munich.⁶⁵

Whereas the IIC struggled to provide direct assistance, private organisations collected donations and found jobs for refugees. In April 1935, the Comité international pour le placement des intellectuels réfugiés issued a special series of stamps in collaboration with the Luxembourg government—the first international campaign of this kind—to collect funds for refugee professional workers and to raise awareness for their situation.⁶⁶ In 1936, the Comité published a collection of essays by famous authors (including Selma Lagerlöf and Thomas Mann) with all proceeds going to charity.⁶⁷ Meanwhile the Academic Assistance Council organised charity events, such as a 1933 speech by Albert Einstein at Royal Albert Hall in London in front of an audience of 10,000 people. By March 1936, the Academic Assistance Council had successfully resettled 363 German scholars and an additional 324 were in temporary safety.⁶⁸

3 Disappointments and Failures: What were the underlying problems in the response by the international community?

The number of academic refugees, however, became larger than feared. In addition to 1,300 professors and university teachers who had lost their jobs by November 1934, there were 4,500 emigrés in the liberal professions as well as up to 1,700 students.⁶⁹ Neither the High Commissioner nor the bodies for intellectual cooperation were able to cope with these numbers, even as the High Commission’s advisor on academic and intellectual refugees, Walter Kotschnig, downplayed the total figure of *all* refugees (academic and otherwise) in July 1935 to 27,500. Kotschnig’s calculations rested on “unjustifiable optimism” and a lack of critical awareness, as Greg Burgess has argued.⁷⁰ Thus, McDonald’s resignation in December 1935 did not come as a surprise, but highlighted some of the more general problems of the League in dealing with the refugee crisis of the 1930s.

One immediate problem was how to prevent Germany from obstructing the League’s work, since it was still a member until October 1933 and denied the very existence of a refugee problem. The solution was to formulate the refugee question as a technical problem and to formally separate the High Commission from the League—it was located first in Lausanne and, from October 1934, in London, improving collaboration with the Academic Assistance Council but weakening the High Commission’s ties to the governments represented in Geneva.

The IIC was in a similar position in Paris. Like the High Commission, it depended on private organisations (and the French government) for funding, and it was unable to carry out much substantial work itself. IIC director Bonnet had to turn down several job applications from refugee academics. He was fortunate to save his German staff member Margarethe Rothbarth until she fled to Switzerland in 1939. Both the IIC

⁶⁴ Theodor Philipp Haas to Henri Bonnet, 4 March 1937; and J. Belime to Dr. Haas (München), 6 March 1937, AG1 IICI-B-IV-44, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

⁶⁵ Theodor Philipp Haas to Lilly Kriesch, 29 July 1946, Box 1, Folder 5, Theodor Philipp Haas Papers, Hunt Institute Archives, Collection no. 212.

⁶⁶ Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, Leaflet, April 1935, C1607/504/06

⁶⁷ Comité International pour le Placement des Intellectuels Réfugiés, *Dichter Helfen* (Zurich, 1936).

⁶⁸ William Beveridge, *A Defence of Free Learning* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 9, 25.

⁶⁹ Haut-Commissariat pour les réfugiés (Israélites et autres) provenant d’Allemagne, Troisième Session du Conseil d’Administration, 1–2 November 1934, 20 A 19923/18812, League of Nations Archives, Geneva.

⁷⁰ Greg Burgess, *The League of Nations and the Refugees from Nazi Germany: James G. MacDonald and Hitler’s Victims* (London, 2016), p. 146.

and the High Commission underestimated the political nature of international cooperation and humanitarian relief. Academic refugees were not, as McDonald had originally thought in 1933, “a purely technical problem”.⁷¹

Yet, the most fundamental difficulty in providing effective help to refugee academics was the lack of support from national governments, both financially and in terms of accepting refugees to enter their countries and labour markets. In fact, aid itself became part of national culture, as Isabella Löhr has shown.⁷² Without funds and authority, however, the League’s bodies were unable to offer any hands-on assistance for the resettlement of academic refugees, and could do little more than keeping an eye on international developments and liaising between the various organisations.

⁷¹ Greg Burgess, *The League of Nations and the Refugees from Nazi Germany: James G. MacDonald and Hitler’s Victims* (London, 2016), p. 43 (citing Statement of James G. McDonald, 5 December 1933, C.1612, League of Nations Archives, Geneva).

⁷² Isabella Löhr, ‘Solidarity and the Academic Community’, *Journal of Modern European History* 12:2 (2014), p. 232.