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TEXTES & DOCUMENTS

OPPOSITION TO THE BOYCOTT OF GERMAN MATHEMATICS IN THE EARLY 1920s: LETTERS BY EDMUND LANDAU (1877–1938) AND EDWIN BIDWELL WILSON (1879–1964)

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Abstract. — This paper, through the publication of two of their letters, sheds light on the political positions of two influential mathematicians of the first half of the 20th century, the German Edmund Landau and the American Edwin Bidwell Wilson. It provides substantial evidence for the widespread rejection of the political boycott of German mathematics not only by the Germans but also by the community of American mathematicians in the early 1920s.

Résumé (Opposition au boycott des mathématiques allemandes dans les années 20 : lettres d'Edmund Landau (1877–1938) et d'Edwin Bidwell Wilson (1879–1964))

Deux parmi les quelques lettres publiées ici : l'une du mathematicien allemand Edmund Landau, l'autre du mathématicien américain Edwin Bidwell Wilson, donnent des éclaircissements sur les positions politiques de leurs auteurs par rapport au boycott de la science allemande du début des années 1920. Elles documentent le refus croissant de ce boycott, non seulement de la part des Allemands, mais aussi de la part de la communauté mathématique aux États-Unis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Versailles treaty of June 1919, half a year after the end of World War I, profoundly influenced the postwar mentalities of the European peoples. One of its effects was the formation of the League of Nations, the forerunner of today's United Nations. It is arguable, however, that the treaty's deficiencies contributed to the perpetuation of prejudices and hostilities, to rearmament, to new military conflicts, and ultimately to World War II. One of its consequences was the foundation of the *Conseil international de recherches* (International Research Council, henceforth IRC) in Brussels in July 1919 under the leadership of the French mathematician Émile Picard (1856–1941). The IRC oversaw the creation in the various scientific disciplines of "international unions" that excluded from membership the so-called "Central Powers," that is, Germany, Austria, and their allies. These unions, representative of the increasing societal importance of science and of the need to find state support for fundamental research, were nevertheless marked by the war and by the hostilities that underlay their creation.[1]

The International Mathematical Union (IMU) of the IRC was founded during the International Congress of Mathematicians at Strasbourg in September 1920 with the Belgian mathematician, Charles-Jean de la Vallée Poussin (1866–1962), elected as its first President [Lehto 1998, p. 23]. The very fact that this congress was held in Strasbourg, a city that had been under German rule until 1918, made a strong political statement. Following an impromptu offer by the American delegates Leonard E. Dickson and Luther P. Eisenhart, it was decided that the next congress would take place in New York City in 1924 [Archibald 1938, p. 19]. It soon became clear, however, that most mathematicians and politicians in the United States were unwilling to support a mathematical congress that excluded the Central Powers. By 1922, the Canadian mathematicians—and

[1] Lehto [1998, p. 33] cited, in particular, a "lack of mathematical substance" in the work of the union in mathematics, meaning apparently that purely political measures dominated over practical work like funding of publications etc. For a more recent account of the impact of World War I, cf. Parshall [2009].

particularly John C. Fields (1863–1932)—had stepped in and declared their willingness to organize the 1924 congress in Toronto.[2]

The fact that this congress still excluded the Central Powers led to a boycott by mathematicians such as the Englishman G. H. Hardy (1877–1947) and the American Oswald Veblen (1880–1960). When those present in Toronto passed a resolution, basically on the initiative of representatives of the American Mathematical Society, to lift the ban,[3] the almost immediate result was the withdrawal of the proposal that had been made in Strasbourg to have the 1928 ICM in Belgium, a country closely allied with France. Italy then came forward to fill the void with an offer to host. There, in Bologna, mathematicians convened—for the first time in the post-World War I era—regardless of their nationality.[4]

Given the different political situations of the countries in which they were living, it should come as no surprise that in the early 1920s many mathematicians from war-affected, allied countries such as France and Belgium supported the boycott against German mathematics, while mathematicians from the former Central Powers almost unanimously opposed it. More interesting and less foreseeable were the positions of mathematicians from what might be called third-party countries, countries formerly allied with France (such as Great Britain and the United States), or with Germany, or from the ostensibly "neutral" countries particularly in Scandinavia. Again, it is not surprising that soon after the war, the mood in the Scandinavian countries was decidedly against the boycott. The brothers Niels and Harald Bohr, the physicist and the mathematician, respectively, showed their impatience with the situation in an interview in Copenhagen in September of 1925 with Augustus Trowbridge, a functionary of the Rockefeller Foundation. They announced that the Scandinavian countries would most likely withdraw from the IRC if the boycott continued. In their view, "[s]cientifically, the Germans are as important to us as any

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2 The eponymous Fields Medal was awarded for the first time at the Oslo Congress in 1936. The money for its endowment came partly from funds earmarked for the congress in Toronto and partly from Fields's private fortune.

3 See Wilson's letter in section 3 below.

4 It should be noted, however, that Germany had not joined the IMU at that time and would not join it until after the Second World War, owing in part to the fact that the IMU was suspended around 1932 [Lehto 1998, p. 56 ff.].

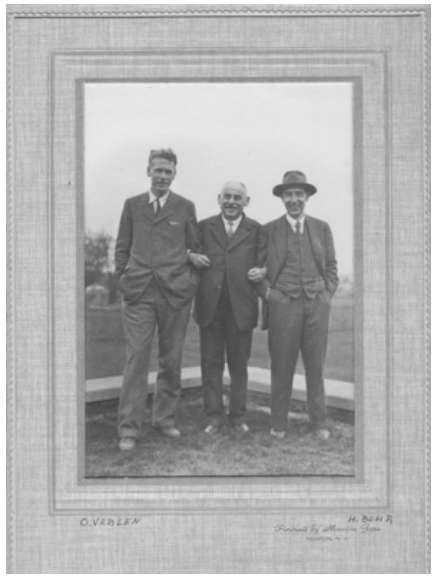

FIGURE 1. The picture shows, from left to right, the American topologist and geometer Oswald Veblen (1880–1960), the German number theorist Edmund Landau (1877–1938), and the Danish analyst Harald Bohr (1887–1951). The three were good friends and vehemently opposed to the boycott. The picture was probably taken in Princeton in the summer 1931 (kind information H. Wefelscheid). Courtesy of The Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton.

nation. We are not politically unanimously pro-German, but scientifically we are. … [Trowbridge] was rather surprised at the heat with which the Scandinavian view was presented" [Siegmund-Schultze 2001, p. 59].

Of course, the opinions of individual mathematicians from all three types of countries varied depending on political—in particular, nationalistic—positions and on scientific relationships maintained with mathematicians from the enemy nations during the war. Nationalists such as Picard and Gabriel Koenigs on the French side and Ludwig Bieberbach and Erhard Schmidt on the German—as well as conservatives or individualists from allied or politically neutral countries such as the Englishman W. H.

Young, the Italian Vito Volterra, and the Dutchman L. E. J. Brouwer[5]—tended to resist reconciliation. The self-righteously anti-boycott stance of some of them represented an emotional attitude of the insulted that led, in reality, to the boycott's perpetuation.[6] The general and dominant tendency, however, was to renounce the boycott and to move toward a normalization of international scientific contacts. This was especially true as admission to the League of Nations increasingly became an explicit goal of German foreign policy. Finally, the political pressure for reconciliation on protagonists such as Picard reached a critical point. At an extraordinary meeting of the IRC in Brussels in June of 1926, the exclusion clause was repealed, and Germany was invited to adhere to the various international scientific unions [Schroeder-Gudehus 1973, p. 110–111]. Then, however, it was the German government that failed in its efforts to convince leading German scholars to join.[7]

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The letters published here for the first time reflect opinions about the boycott typical of—on the one hand—the German, and—on the other hand—the "third party" positions. From 1922 and 1924, they predate the boycott's official cessation in 1926 and reveal the opinions of the liberal, German-Jewish, pure mathematician from Göttingen, Edmund Landau (1877–1938), and of the more conservative, American applied mathematician, Edwin Bidwell Wilson (1879–1964), respectively. Not surprisingly,

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5 Young's individualist efforts to save the relationship between the IRC and the IMU has been described in detail by Lehto [1998, p. 50–56]. Brouwer's pro-German position was inspired by his aversion to French nationalism [Dalen 1999/2005].

6 Paradoxically, their anti-boycott stance actually resulted in Bieberbach and Schmidt boycotting the Bologna Congress of 1928, even though its main organizer, Salvatore Pincherle, who was then the President of the IMU, had gone out of his way to make it open to all nations. They would find certain elements of the organization inacceptable, like an excursion to Riva del Garda (September 7, 1928) in former southern Tyrol which had become Italian in 1919. This sort of resistance against getting over the boycott was quite frequent in the late 1920s, see [Schroeder-Gudehus 1973].

7 It was only after World War II that a renewed IMU became gradually responsible for holding the International Congresses of Mathematicians. Political problems persisted, although of very different kinds represented by the situations in the Soviet Union, East Germany, and Taiwan. The difficult history of the IMU and its ambiguous relationship to the ICMs is described in detail in [Lehto 1998].