

Those *Actes*: Some Notes on the Proceedings of the International Library Committee, 1930-1939

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In preparing a chapter for the IFLA Centenary book that is to be published in 2027, I've made heavy use of the published proceedings of the International Library Committee (ILC). It struck me that some information about the proceedings should be of interest to other IFLA historians, hence this post.

The International Library Committee

The committee was established in 1927 when IFLA was founded in Edinburgh, as the "International Library and Bibliographic Committee". It met for the first time in Rome in 1928 to give effect to the resolution adopted in Edinburgh and to prepare for the World Library and Bibliographical Congress in Italy the following year, 1929. It was there that IFLA's constitution as a federation, and its name as the International Federation of Library Associations, were approved. The word "Bibliography" was deleted from the Committee's name as a result of some political manoeuvring that will be discussed in my chapter, but the International Library Committee remained, serving as IFLA's standing or executive committee, roughly the equivalent of today's Governing Board. It met annually in different cities, almost exclusively in Europe, and at its meetings, each member association had one vote, although there could be additional non-voting delegates. These were often interested librarians from the countries where the meeting was held. In fact, as time passed, the numbers of participants grew, so that by the late 1930s the meetings started looking like IFLA conferences of later years.



SEANCE D'OUVERTURE DE LA 9^e SESSION DU COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL DES BIBLIOTHÈQUES AU PALAIS STASZIC À VARSOVIE.
Opening session of the ILC in 1936 (Source: *Actes* 1936, frontispiece)

Although the Committee met annually, IFLA's international congresses were to take place every five years. (As a result of economic and geopolitical factors, only one took place during the Interwar years, in 1935.) Consequently, it was by the name of its standing committee, the International Library Committee, that IFLA was generally known. As a result, information and documentation about IFLA can more readily be found in the contemporary literature and in the archives of the League of Nations and elsewhere, under that name than under the name IFLA.

A Multilingual Committee

I estimate that used in IFLA's early years French was used more than English. In fact, many of the ILC delegates were admirably multilingual. French, English, German, Italian and Spanish were spoken at meetings, roughly in that order of frequency. Members spoke in any of these five languages, and their remarks and reports were recorded in the languages in which they spoke. There is hardly ever any mention of any form of interpretation, although a few documents were translated. Admirable as this multilingualism is (in my view) it also led to considerable confusion.

The use of the term "session" (in French *séance*) is an example. An annual meeting of the ILC, which would take place over several (English) sessions on several days, was a *session* in French, and in IFLA also in English. The various sittings (each of a few hours, several per day) were called *séances*. The executive committee (the president, vice-presidents, secretary general, and assistant secretary) was mostly called the *Bureau*, but occasionally referred to as the Executive, as was the Committee itself. This confusion is minor when compared to the confusion that we find in the archives of the League of Nations. Here we find that terms such as names of committees, used very inconsistently to start with, were translated from English into French, and back again into English, and back again into French, and vice versa. The French *commission* was mostly translated into English as 'committee', but sometimes as 'commission'. The Expert Committee of Librarians, which plays a big role in my chapter, was sometimes the Committee of Library Experts and sometimes the Committee of Expert Librarians.

The "Sessions" of the International Library Committee

In 1930 the ILC met in Stockholm. This was its third annual meeting, but the first "routine" meeting, the first two meetings having been mainly concerned with getting the organisation running. Starting in 1930, meeting proceedings were written up very comprehensively, professionally edited, and published in printed volumes by a succession of scholarly publishers, under the name *Actes du Comité international des bibliothèques*, which is why they are commonly referred to as the *Actes*.

The proceedings of the meeting in 1930 were published in 1930 in Uppsala, Sweden, by Almqvist & Wiksell, numbered as Volume II. Volume I was published in the following year, 1931, also by Almqvist & Wiksell. It contained accounts of the *Travaux préparatoires* (the meetings in Prague in 1926, in Atlantic City and Philadelphia in 1926, and in Edinburgh in 1927, at which the decision to establish IFLA gradually crystallised) followed by proceedings of the first session in Rome in 1928 and of the second session in Rome, Florence and Venice on the fringes of the World Congress of Libraries and Bibliography, which met in all those

cities in 1929. The numbers and dates appear somewhat confusing, since volume numbers are always one less than session numbers, and the year of publication of *Actes* does not always correspond to the year of the Session. The timeline below (Table 1) sets out the sequence from 1926 to 1930.

Table 1: Timeline of IFLA's creation and naming, 1926-1932

Date	Actes volume no. and year of publication.	Actes "Session"	Events
1926 June	I, 1931	No number ("Founding documents")	International Congress of Librarians and Bibliophiles, Prague: Gabriel Henriot's proposal to establish a permanent international committee is adopted.
1926 Oct	I, 1931	Ditto	50 th Anniversary Conference of the American Library Association, Atlantic City & Philadelphia; followed by farewell luncheon in Washington, 22 October: ALA is requested to pursue the forming of an International Library Committee .
1927 Sept	I, 1931	Ditto	50 th Anniversary Conference of the Library Association, Edinburgh: a meeting of library association delegates adopts a "proposal" to establish an International Library and Bibliographical Committee , subject to ratification by the library associations of the respective members. (This committee is sometimes referred to as the Executive Committee.)
1928 March	I, 1931	1	"First Plenary session of the International Library and Bibliographical Committee", Rome, March 1928. Following a positive responses from library associations. The Committee is declared "definitely constituted". Sevensma proposed as "permanent Secretary". Conditions set by the ICIC (his employer) are discussed. Decision stands over. Heinrich Uhlendahl serves as Secretary for the meeting. Rome is chosen as the venue for the "International Bibliographical Congress" in 1929. Congress programme is discussed.
1928-29	-	-	ILC requests Sir Eric Drummond (Secretary General of the League of Nations) to permit Sevensma to serve as Secretary of IFLA. He agrees, subject to two conditions.
1929 June	I, 1931	2	First <i>séance</i> (sitting) of the Second Session, Rome. Decided to drop the word "bibliographical" [a condition set by the ICIC for granting permission for Sevensma to serve as Secretary]. Sevensma is appointed as Permanent Secretary. Decided to name the new body the International Federation of Library Associations , and adopt the name of International Library Committee to refer to the former Executive Committee.
1929 June	-	-	International Congress meets under the name of <i>Congrès Mondial des Bibliothèques</i> (World congress of Libraries)..
1929 June	I, 1931	2	25 June: second <i>séance</i> (sitting) of the Second Session, Florence. Noted: that the Congress has approved the proposed Statutes with minor changes. 29 June: third <i>séance</i> (meeting of the Second Session, Venice
1930 August	II, 1930	3	International Library Committee meets in Stockholm. The pattern of the proceedings (<i>Actes du Comité International des Bibliothèques</i>) begins to take shape.

Contents of the Actes

By 1932, a standard pattern for the *Actes* has been established. In the *Actes* of the Bern meeting of that year, we find a group photo and list of delegates. A comparison of the successive group photographs reflects how IFLA's gender and geographical representativeness evolved. These are followed by flowery welcoming addresses, responses to the addresses, and reports by the President and Secretary General.

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Composition du Comité international des Bibliothèques à sa 9 ^{ème} session	3
Composition des Sous-Commissions de la Fédération	6
<i>Première séance, dimanche 31 mai à 15 heures.</i>	
1. Discours d'ouverture de M. GODET, Président du Comité	9
2. Rapport de M. SEVENSMA, Secrétaire général de la Fédération internationale, et rapport financier	18
<i>Deuxième séance, lundi 1^{er} juin à 10 heures.</i>	
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<i>Troisième séance, lundi 1^{er} juin à 15 heures.</i>	
6. Le Prêt international — Exécution des décisions prises par le II ^{ème} Congrès international des Bibliothèques et de Bibliographie	37
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9. Rapport du représentant de l'Institut international de coopération intellectuelle sur l'activité de l'Institut dans le domaine des bibliothèques et de la bibliographie	56
10. Prochaine session du Comité	56
Liste des Annexes (Voir page suivante)	

Example of Table of Contents (*Actes* 1936). IFLA followed Continental tradition in placing the table of contents at the end of the volume.

The President often addressed important events that had occurred in the preceding year, such as major publications, bibliographic projects, new library projects or library fires. Sometimes the President commented on important trends, such as the rise of documentation and what it meant for libraries (1938) and on a few occasions political and ethical issues were addressed.

A prime example was President Marcel Godet's 1939 circumspect but firm rejection of totalitarian restrictions on freedom of information (1939). The Secretary General (Sevensma throughout this period) reported on internal matters such as new members and work carried out by the Bureau, and of course finance.

These were followed by various *communications* (matters that delegates wanted to have discussed); and reports by subcommittees. The *communications* and subcommittee reports reveal the scope of IFLA's activities, for example, international inter-library lending and customs tariffs, public libraries, training of librarians, national library and book production statistics, exchanges of university theses, microfilming, standardisation of publications, and prices and "overproduction" of periodicals. Some of the reports were long and detailed, the result of in depth investigation, often given in full as *annexes*. The reports were discussed in depth, the discussions being reported in some detail. An example is an impressive report on a survey of hospital libraries presented in 1932. Are historians of hospital and medical libraries aware of this source? Over time the number of annexes increased.

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	Pages.
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II. Congrès international des Bibliothèques d'Hôpitaux (Paris 8-11 mai 1936)	66
III. Rapport sur les bibliothèques d'hôpitaux 1935-1936 (H. LEMAITRE)	69
IV. First report of the Sub-Committee on Special Libraries and Information Centres (E. LANCASTER-JONES)	73
V. Rapport de la Sous-Commission des Bibliothèques parlementaires (E. DAMIANI, J. RAIS)	83
VI. Arbeitsprogramm der Unterkommission für Normung auf dem Gebiet des Bibliotheks-, Buch- und Zeitschriftenwesens (F. PRINZHORN)	90
VII. Report of the Sub-committee on overproduction of books and periodicals (W. MUNTKE)	93
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XIII. Rapport de la Sous-commission des questions juridiques relatives au prêt international	109
XIV. Les bibliothèques polonaises en 1934-1935 (J. MUSZKOWSKI)	111
XV. Die deutschen wissenschaftlichen Bibliotheken 1935/36 (H. A. KRUS)	114
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XX. La Bibliothèque Vaticane en 1935-36 (Mgr. E. TISSERANT)	130
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Example of (part of) a list of Annexes (*Actes* 1936). Note multiple languages.

Among the *communications* we find annual reports from the Paris Institute (International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation on their work in librarianship and bibliography. From 1936 onwards, there are also reports from the International Institute (later Federation) for Documentation.

I want to draw attention to the *country reports* of which we see a growing number starting in 1931. In these reports delegates report on developments in their countries. Of special historical interest are the occasional reports from less prominent countries such as Latvia, Estonia, Iran, the Philippines, and Mexico, and New Zealand. But even the regular annual reports from major member countries such as the UK and the USA offer material that may be of interest to historians.

Immediately after each meeting, IFLA's assistant secretary, Sevensma's young Austrian law librarian, Arthur Breycha-Vauthier produced a *meeting résumé* which was promptly disseminated to the members.

Like reflections of reality reaching the interior of (a comfortable) Plato's cave, echoes of political and economic turmoil also reached the quiet and dignified meetings of the International Library Committee: the budget cuts affecting libraries during the Great Depression (1929-1939); a report by the Secretary General on a programme to assist German librarians who had been forced out of their jobs because they were Jewish; a farsighted but rejected proposal by Czech librarian Jan Emler to introduce an emblem for identifying important cultural property (*Actes* 1933); and reports from Spanish librarians on practical measures to safeguard valuable collections during the Spanish Civil War (*Actes* 1937). During the Second Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945, the representative of the Japanese Library Association blandly reported that a national library was being created for the puppet state of Manchukuo, a Chinese province that had been captured by Japan (*Actes* 1938).



Chinese troops in defensive positions at Shanghai, 1932 (Wikimedia)

In 1938 country reports from Austria ceased, after the country had been incorporated into Germany (the *Anschluss* of 1938). A careful reading between the lines of successive annual reports from Germany in the 1930s reveals a slow but steady spread of Nazi control over the *Volksbüchereien* (people's libraries) and their collections, as had happened in Fascist Italy. This is the background to the Presidential address by Godet to which I referred earlier.

For us today, knowing what was soon to happen, it seems incredible that the ILC members in 1939 confirmed IFLA's acceptance of the invitation from Germany to host the Third World Congress there in 1940 as part of the celebrations of the (re)invention of printing in the West 500 years earlier, a celebration which risked the exploitation of IFLA for Nazi cultural propaganda. Needless to say, that event did not take place.

Access

The Actes are quite substantial documents that were not only distributed to member associations, but also offered for sale. Today they are available in digital format. All the Actes have been scanned and are available via the Hathi Trust at <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000058958>.

Paging through the *Actes*, I encountered many “pearls” – snippets and comments that bring librarianship and library personalities of the period to life. A detailed cumulative index to the Actes for 1928 to 1964 greatly facilitates their use.

It is available in IFLA's online Repository at [IFLA_ACTES_cumulative_subject_index_1928-1964.pdf \(7.21 MB\)](#)

Some statistics

To conclude, Table 2 presents some statistics of attendance of the ILC meetings and of their *Actes*, last page.

Table 2: Analysis of IFLA Actes 1930-1939¹

Session no.	Vol. no.	Year	City	Countries represented ²	Delegates ³	Women ⁴	Pages	Annexes	Country reports
3	II	1930	Stockholm	20	40	2	81	20	5
4	III	1931	Cheltenham	12	20	0	76	17	9
5	IV	1932	Berne	11	25	4	170	28	16
6	V	1933	Chicago & Avignon	18	45	1	206	33	15
7	VI	1934	Madrid	10	25	3	110	21	12
8	VII	1935	Madrid & Barcelona ⁵	25	65	8	164	37	30
9	VIII	1936	Warsaw	17	34	1	200	36	21
10	IX	1937	Paris ⁶	21	61	8	187	37	26
11	X	1938	Brussels	16	49	6	187	36	22
12	XI	1939	The Hague & Amsterdam	15	46	9	206	35	16
Total				165	410	42	1587	300	172
Mean				16,5	41	4,2	159	30	17

¹ The *Actes* of the first two sessions (meetings) of the International Library Committee were short and not yet organised in a standard pattern

² The figures in this column are from the introductory paragraph on the first page of each volume.

³ The figures in this column are from the introductory paragraph on the first page of each volume. The term delegates appears to have been used loosely to refer to multiple participants per country, not voting delegates.

⁴ Difficult to count, not always evident from attendance list.

⁵ Higher attendance attributable to the holding of the Second International Congress of Libraries and Bibliography, 20-30 May 1935.

⁶ High turnout attributable to the holding of the World Congress of Universal Documentation (*Congrès Mondial de la Documentation Universelle*) (16-21 August) and the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques*, held in Paris in that month.