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The first 20 years in the development of the International Telegraph Union

Review on the International Telegraph Conference in Berlin, 1885



by J. KNIESTEDT

1. Introduction

IN the year 1885 representatives of 37 countries assembled in Berlin for their sixth International Telegraph Conference. The International Telegraph Union, which organized this Conference, at that time—that is, 20 years after its foundation—already included 40 Member States and 13 private telegraph companies. The 100th anniversary of the Conference was an occasion for summarizing the development of the International Telegraph Union until the year of the Conference and for reporting on the Conference.

2. Initial international agreements on telegraphy

As early as in 1849, the Prussian and the Austrian Telegraph Administrations signed a "Protocol" on the establishment and use of the international telegraph line leading from Hamburg to Vienna and Trieste via Berlin. This Protocol was the basis for the foundation of the Austro-German Telegraphic Union in 1850. Only a short time later,

Prussia succeeded in regulating telegraphic correspondence with Belgium, Switzerland and Russia by similar agreements.

In 1855, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain and Sardinia united in the Telegraphic Union of Western Europe. First connections between the two telegraph associations were established at conferences held in Berlin and Brussels in that same year and in 1858 with delegations from Prussia, France and Belgium.

3. Foundation of the International Telegraph Union (Paris, 1865)

After a final Conference of the Signatories to the Brussels Convention in Bregenz in 1863, the multiplicity of relations between the Members of the two Telegraph Unions had developed to such an extent that there was a general feeling that a joint telegraph conference of the European countries should be organized for the first time.

The French Emperor Napoleon III invited this Conference to meet in Paris on 1 March 1865. Twenty countries

participated in this first International Telegraph Conference. The German *Länder* represented were Baden, Bavaria, Hamburg, Hanover, Prussia, Saxony and Württemberg-Hohenzollern.

The objective of the Paris Conference was to merge the two international telegraph associations into a joint union and to work out an international telegraph convention on the basis of the individual agreements. On the proposal of Austria, the chairmanship of the Conference was conferred on the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Drouyn de Lhuys. A Group of Experts, chaired by the Director-General of the *Lignes télégraphiques de France*, the Viscount H. de Vougy, was set up for the working out of a Convention. In view of the fact that the countries were represented by unequal numbers of delegates, the Swiss Plenipotentiary, Minister Kern, proposed that each country should be accorded one vote only. The proposal was accepted and this principle is still valid today at international meetings.

The 63-Article Convention worked out at the Paris Conference included in an

Annex the terminal and transit rates of the individual contracting States and a set of regulations for the international service. Some of the main provisions and new regulations of the International Telegraph Convention were:

- everybody is entitled to the use of the telegraph;
- the preservation of the secrecy of telegraphy is guaranteed;
- the Morse instrument shall be uniformly applied;
- the gold franc is made the international monetary unit for establishing tariffs and the settlement of international accounts between administrations;

— the Convention shall be adjusted to technical progress and increasing volumes of traffic from time to time and shall be revised to this purpose at Plenipotentiary Conferences in their function as supreme organ of the Union.

The French proposal to set up a permanent commission for the management of affairs was not adopted at the Conference. The Paris Convention became effective on 1 January 1866. Still in 1866 Luxembourg, Romania and Serbia also acceded to the International Telegraph Union. Great Britain became a Member of the Union in 1871 after its telegraph services had been nationalized. The first non-European

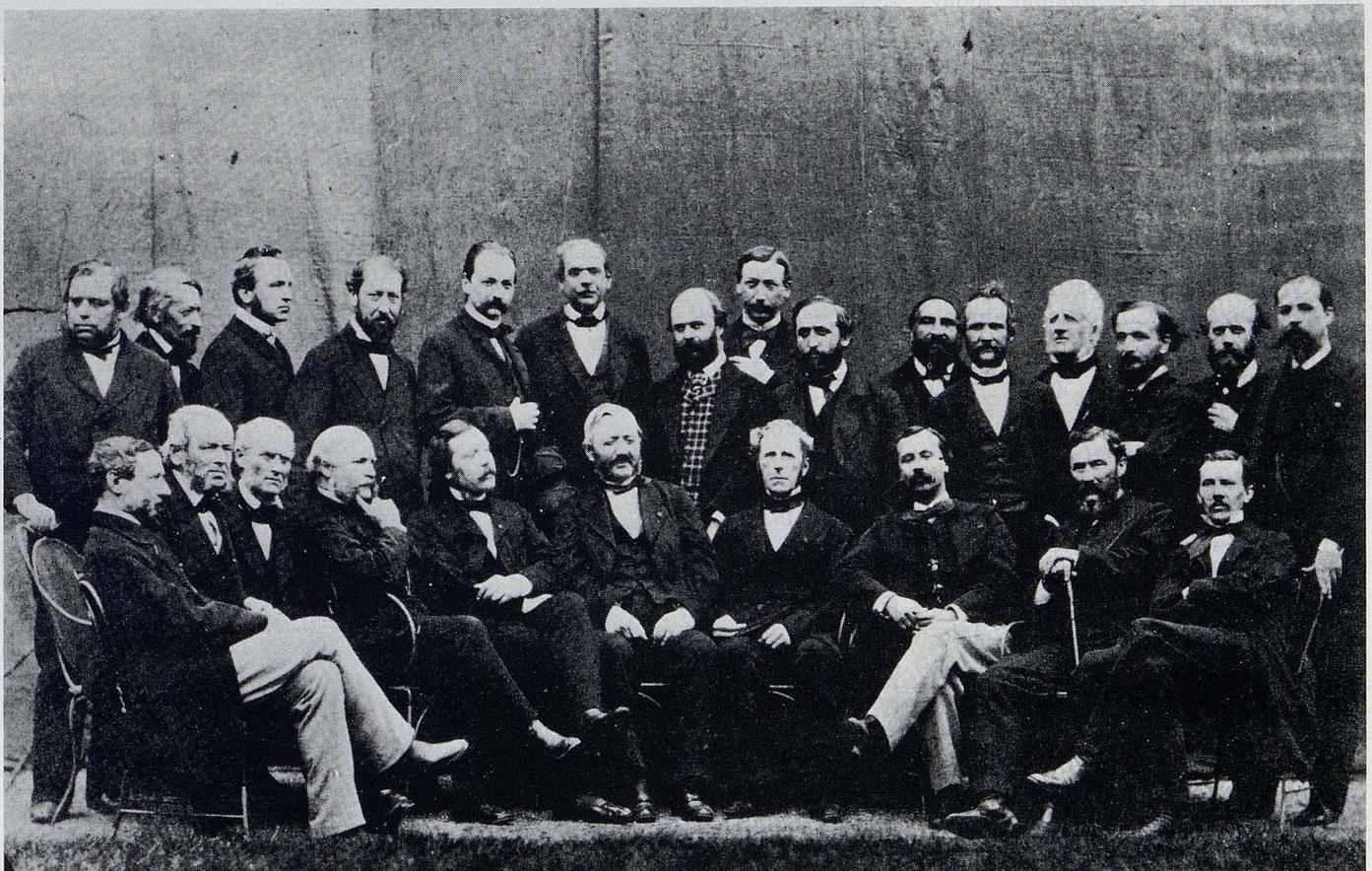
Members of the Union were Persia and British India who acceded in 1869.

4. Further Conferences of the International Telegraph Union up to 1879

It has already been mentioned that the Paris Conference thought it necessary to convene periodical meetings of the Plenipotentiaries for the revision of the International Telegraph Convention.

Vienna (1868)

At this second International Telegraph Conference, the proposal to set up a permanent commission for the management of the affairs of the Union met with a larger level of support. Instead of



Delegates to the foundation Conference of the International Telegraph Union in Paris in 1865

(Schweizerische Post-, Telephon- und Telegraphenbetriebe)

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setting up a commission, the Conference, however, decided to establish the International Bureau of Telegraph Administrations. The Conference transferred the task of installing the Bureau as a central organ of the telegraph administrations to neutral Switzerland and laid down its main functions as follows:

- the collection of information provided by the Member States on operational and tariff matters;
- the setting up and publishing of tariff rates and statistics;
- the issue of a periodical and of an official map of telegraph lines.

Already in 1869 the Bureau began to issue the *Journal télégraphique*, today entitled *Journal des télécommunications*.

Rome (1871-1872)

At the third International Telegraph Conference, with the new Member State Great Britain and a Japanese observer attending the meeting for the first time, private telegraph companies were given the right to participate, but not to vote. This Conference, among other things, set up guidelines for the differentiation between telegrams in secret and plain language.

St. Petersburg (1875)

The fourth International Telegraph Conference was to remain the last Plenipotentiary Conference for many years. It took the decision to divide the treaty into the actual International Telegraph Convention and the Telegraph Regulations.

The Convention comprised the fundamental provisions which could only be modified by the Plenipotentiaries. The Telegraph Regulations, on the other hand, were open to revision by the delegates of the administrations at Administrative Conferences. In this context it should be noted that the Plenipotentiaries did not meet again until 1932 in Madrid.



From 1869 to 1876, the International Bureau of Telegraph Administrations in Bern was accommodated on the third floor of this building of the Canton Bank in the *Bundesgasse*

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(Schweizerische Post-, Telephon- und Telegraphenbetriebe)

At the St. Petersburg Conference, the German Plenipotentiary, *Generalpostmeister* H. C. von Stephan, pointed out that there was too much difference in the tariff rates levied by the individual countries. At that time no harmonization or simplification of the tariff structure was achieved.

London (1879)

The fifth International Telegraph Conference was the first meeting at the level of administrations' delegates only, who met to revise the Regulations including the tables of rates. At the Conference, Mr von Stephan proposed to adopt a uniform rate per word instead of the different tariff rates based on groups of words. This notwithstanding, the Conference only decided that a basic rate totalling five times the rate per word should be introduced. Thus the high minimum rate for 20 words which had been charged until then was finally abolished.

5. The International Telegraph Conference of Berlin (1885)

5.1 Opening of the Conference and participants

The Posts and Telegraph Administration of the German *Reich* made available for the organization of the Conference the building of the Berlin telegraph school founded in 1859. The State Secretary in the *Reichspostamt*, Mr von Stephan, opened the meeting on 10 August 1885. In his speech, he pointed out the significant progress made in the field of telegraphy. The telegraph had developed from a luxury object to an article of daily use in little less than 30 years. The objective of the Conference was to make telegraphy an ordinary means of communication for the public through simple and modest tariff rates. On the proposal of Great Britain, the chairmanship of the Conference was conferred on Mr von Stephan.

Thirty-seven of the 40 Member States of the Union had sent about 80 delegates to the Berlin Conference. All of the following European Member States of the Union attended the meeting: Austria; Belgium; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Bulgaria; Denmark; France; Germany; Great Britain; Greece; Hungary; Italy; Luxembourg; Montenegro; The Netherlands; Norway; Portugal; Romania; Russia; Serbia; Spain; Sweden; Switzerland and Turkey.

The following non-European countries were represented: Brazil; British India; Cochin China; Egypt; Japan; New South Wales; New Zealand; Persia; Senegal; Siam; South Australia; Tasmania; Tunisia and Victoria.

5.2 Organization of the Conference

In accordance with the rules of procedure already adopted at the London Conference, the Plenary Session estab-

lished once more the following two commissions, which in turn elected their Presidents and Vice-Presidents:

- Tariffs Commission

President:

Baron Brunner von Wattenwyl
(Austria)

Vice-President:

Mr E. D'Amico (Italy), Director-General of Telegraphy.

- Commission on regulatory matters

President:

Mr Hake (Germany), Director of the Reichspostamt

Vice-President:

Baron Capanema (Brazil), Director-General of Telegraphy.

5.3 Proposals for the telegraph service presented at the Conference

At the Berlin Conference, Mr von Stephan again presented his



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Heinrich C. von Stephan, State Secretary in the Reichspostamt, President of the International Telegraph Conference of 1885

(Bundespostmuseum, Frankfurt-am-Main)



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The building housing the telegraph school (on the right side) in Artilleriestrasse, Berlin, where the International Telegraph Conference was held in 1885

(Bundespostmuseum, Frankfurt-am-Main)

proposal, which had been modified in the meantime, suggesting a reduction of the tariff rates and a uniform rate per word in each country. Referring to the charging of international telegram, Mr von Stephan complained that the rates to be paid by terminal countries were higher than the rates for internal telegrams, although international telegrams only required one service, that is either collection or delivery unlike internal telegrams which required both services.

A second proposal had already been presented by Austria-Hungary at the St. Petersburg Conference proposing: to standardize the flat rate for all telegrams, that is, to do without rates per word.

5.4 Results of the Conference for the telegraph service

The discussion in the Tariffs Commission brought about three possible solutions:

- mere rate per word;
- rate per word with a minimum rate to be applied;
- rate per word with a basic rate to be applied.

The delegates finally agreed on the adoption of the mere rate per word at an almost uniform level for terminal and transit countries in Europe. The Plenary Session approved of this proposal which provided for the following rates per word:

- Terminal rate for countries of origin or destination: 10 centimes.
- Rate for each country of transit: 8 centimes.

The Berlin tariff rates remained effective until 1909.

5.5 First regulations for the international telephone traffic

As a new means of information transmission, the telephone had joined the telegraph apparatus at that time. Mr von Stephan, who had predicted a great future to the telephone in his opening address, submitted to the Conference a draft for some initial regulations of the international telephone traffic.

The Berlin Conference adopted the German proposals with slight modifications. They read approximately as follows:

- 1) the administrations install circuits for the international telephone traffic according to requirements;
- 2) the administrations shall agree on the technical apparatus to be used as well as on the operation and charging of international telephone calls;
- 3) the unit for charging and for establishing the call duration is a call of 5 minutes.

This was indeed the first time that provisions for the telephone traffic were incorporated in an international convention.

5.6 Conclusion of the Berlin Telegraph Conference

The Berlin revised version of the International Telegraph Convention along with the Telegraph Regulations and tables of rates for the international telegraph traffic dated 17 September 1885 had the following structure:

- preliminary remarks including a list of the countries and private telegraph companies which were Members of the Union in the year of the Conference;
- the International Telegraph Convention comprising 21 Articles (in the unchanged version of St. Petersburg, 1875);
- International Telegraph Regulations comprising 87 Articles;
- the table of international tariff rates.

In the final session of the Conference the delegates of 34 administrations signed the new Regulations connected to the International Telegraph Convention. The Berlin revised version became effective on 1 July 1886. Thanks to the harmonization and further reduction of the rates, the public could increasingly make use of the telegraph service.

6. Conclusion

The International Telegraph Union, which became in 1932 the International Telecommunication Union, counts 164 Members today and can indeed be considered as the oldest of all existing international organizations. A review on the foundation of the Union, and the first 20 years of its development, clearly demonstrates that in the field of telegraphy close international co-operation of the States to the benefit of all people existed already more than 100 years ago, in what was indeed a model for other international organizations. The international co-operation in the field of telecommunications

goes to prove in an impressive way that it is possible to handle the most difficult problems and to find solutions which are acceptable to all parties concerned.

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Having a degree of engineer, **Joachim Kniestedt** has worked at the Federal Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications in Bonn since 1968. His responsibilities include international questions concerning broadcast transmitter networks. He has written several articles about the history of radiocommunication and the ITU's administrative radio conferences.