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Emigration of mathematicians from outside German-speaking academia 1933–1963, supported by the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning

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Abstract

Racial and political persecution of German-speaking scholars from 1933 onward has already been extensively studied. The archives of the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL), which are deposited in the Western Manuscripts Collection at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, is a rich source of information about the emigration of European scientists, also those who did not come from German-speaking institutions. This is an account of the support given by the SPSL to the persecuted mathematicians among them. The challenges faced by these emigrants included, in addition to anti-Semitism and xenophobia in their countries both of origin and of destination, the restricted financial means of the SPSL, and the sometimes arbitrary assessment of academic merits.

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Zusammenfassung

Der rassistischen und politischen Verfolgung deutschsprachiger Wissenschaftler nach 1933 wurden bereits umfassende Studien gewidmet. Die Akten der Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL), die bei der Western Manuscripts Collection der Bodleian Library in Oxford deponiert sind, bieten umfangreiche Informationen zur Emigration auch derjenigen europäischen Wissenschaftler, die nicht deutschsprachig sozialisiert waren. Hier soll die Unterstützung der SPSL für verfolgte nicht-deutschsprachige Mathematiker beschrieben werden. Diesen Emigranten standen verschiedene Hindernisse entgegen; insbesondere Antisemitismus und Xenophobie in den Ursprungsländern und auch Empfangsländern, die zeitweilig problematische ökonomische Situation der SPSL, sowie einige Willkürlichkeiten in der Beurteilung akademischer Meriten.

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1. Introduction

Soon after the Nazi takeover in Germany in 1933, anti-Semitic and other political purging of the civil service was enacted into law.¹ Thousands of academics were affected, and aid organizations were set up in many European countries as well as in the United States to assist refugee scholars. In Britain, the Academic Assistance Council (AAC) was founded in 1933 on the initiative of William Beveridge, then director of the London School of Economics. Nobel laureates Ernest Rutherford and Archibald V. Hill were appointed president and vice-president, respectively. The AAC was reorganized as the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL) in 1936, and in 1997 it was renamed the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA).²

For general treatments of the history of the AAC and SPSL, see, e.g., [Baldwin, 1989; Bentwich, 1953; Beveridge, 1959; Zimmerman, 2006]. Specialized studies focusing on the assistance of the AAC/SPSL to mathematicians in particular are few and far between: two substantial ones are [Fletcher, 1986], with an account of the assistance of the AAC to German mathematicians during the early years 1933–1936, and [Rider, 1984], which treats the emigration of mathematicians and physicists to the United States and Britain 1933–1945. Neither of these contains much information about mathematicians from outside German-speaking academia, however, except for a brief outline in Rider [1984, 119–122].

The purpose of the AAC was twofold: to create a fund for financial support of displaced scholars; and to act as a placement service, putting academics in touch with institutions. A sizeable fund³ was the result of a public appeal in the summer of 1933, enabling grants to be awarded to refugees in need. To connect displaced scholars with prospective employers, the AAC was in regular contact with established academics in Britain and the United States, requesting their confidential opinions about the scientific merits of each refugee. Some of these were themselves refugees from persecution, for instance, Harald Bohr, Richard Courant, Jacques Hadamard, and Hermann Weyl. In many cases, refugees first arriving in Britain were later reestablished in the United States.

Other frequent referents for mathematics were Selig Brodetsky, Godfrey H. Hardy, John E. Littlewood, Louis J. Mordell, and John Henry C. Whitehead. Of these, Hardy in particular was explicit about the goal of strengthening British mathematics by having the scientifically strongest of the refugees absorbed into British universities. He made it clear that he meant Britain, and not the dominions of the British Empire.⁴

2. Scope of the investigation

The category “German-speaking mathematician” is circumscribed by Reinhard Siegmund-Schultze in his book on the emigration of mathematicians from Nazi Germany:

¹ April 7, 1933: Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums.

² <http://www.academic-refugees.org/>.

³ SPSL 36, 37, 51/1–2.

⁴ SPSL 283/6 f332 8 December 1934 Hardy to AAC: “There are several men whom I should wish to recommend very strongly—for example, Heilbronn (perhaps the best of all the mathematical refugees), and Rado. But I should wish to see them here, or at Oxford, and not in Canada or Australia.” (I interpret this as a probable reaction to the Carnegie Fund policy of supporting refugees applying for posts in the dominions of the British Empire.)

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