A REFUGE FOR SCHOLARS

Present Challenges in Historical Perspective

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY
HISTORY WORKING GROUP
## CONTENTS

**Introduction**

A House of Refuge 4

**Articles**

The Institute’s Founding Ethos in Our Precarious Present 7

Emmy Noether’s Paradise 11

Einstein, Plumbers, and McCarthyism 13

Exhibit: A Scholar’s Paradise, in the World 15

Correspondence between Flexner and von Neumann 16

Flexner’s Correspondence with Einstein and Weyl 18

Correspondence between Flexner and Veblen 20

Amalie Emmy Noether 22

The Institute’s Activism in Favor of Displaced Scholars 24

Ernst Kapp 26

Kurt Gödel 28

Displaced Children Visit Einstein 30

Einstein and McCarthyism 32

Albert O. Hirschman 34

The Institute’s Continued Engagement 36

※
The three articles reproduced here, originally published in the Spring 2017 issue of the Institute Letter, were written by a Member-organized History Working Group that mobilized in response to the January 27, 2017, executive order initially banning travel and immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries. The History Working Group articles were authored by Fadi Bardawil, Member in the School of Social Science; Thomas Dodman, Member in the School of Historical Studies; Ian Jauslin, Member in the School of Mathematics; Pascal Marichalar, Visitor in the School of Social Science; Klaus Oschema, Gerda Henkel Stiftung Member in the School of Historical Studies; and Peter Redfield, Member in the School of Social Science. The authors acknowledge the help and past work of Josie Faass, Director of Academic Affairs; Peter Goddard, Professor Emeritus in the School of Natural Sciences and past Director of the Institute; Erica Mosner, Archival Assistant; Amy Ramsey, Associate Content Editor; Kelly Devine Thomas, Editorial Director; María Tuya, Digital Scholarship Software Support Specialist; Marcia Tucker, Librarian, Historical Studies and Social Science; and Karen Uhlenbeck, Visitor in the School of Mathematics and Professor and Sid W. Richardson Regents Chairholder at the University of Texas at Austin. Peter Goddard wrote the Introduction.

This booklet, and the individual documents reproduced in it, are available online in PDF format from the Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center, Institute for Advanced Study, at:

https://library.ias.edu/refuge
INTRODUCTION

A House of Refuge

Moments of conception are, perhaps, necessarily contingent and precarious. Certainly, it was so in the case of the Institute for Advanced Study. For its founders, Louis Bamberger and his sister, Caroline Bamberger Fuld, had other plans when they sent their representatives to Abraham Flexner to ask for advice on how to found a medical school. And, it was only by fortunate timing that the Bambergers had retained the resources to enable them to devote $5 million to the project, because they had sold their business to Macy’s for $11 million in cash, as well as some of Macy’s stock, shortly before the Great Crash of 1929.

But the seed Flexner planted in their minds was not for a school to train physicians; rather, it was set to germinate into his own dream, a new type of institution: an institute for advanced study. Others had also been dreaming such dreams. In the dark days before the end of the First World War, the Norwegian-American economist Thorstein Veblen proposed in his influential book *The Higher Learning in America* that, in order to reestablish international communication between academics after the conflict, an institution should be established in the United States for artists and scholars of all nations to work together. He proposed that this institution as a house of refuge and entertainment, a nice term for the Institute, which, from its earliest days, has provided its Faculty and Members with a refuge from the pressures of the contemporary university, and entertainment in the sense of academic diversion as well as lodging and hospitality.

The Bambergers made it clear from the start that discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or gender was to have no place at the Institute. In their invitation letter to the first Board of Trustees, they wrote on June 4, 1930, “We feel strongly that the spirit characteristic of America at its noblest, above all the pursuit of higher learning, cannot admit of any conditions as to personnel other than those designed to promote the objects for which this institution is established, and particularly with no regard whatever to accidents of race, creed, or sex.” And they stipulated that this applied to the Institute’s staff as much as to its Faculty and Members. The Institute was born just as the Great Depression was deepening and fascist regimes were spreading through parts of Europe. Its early development continued through the Second World War, the beginning of the Cold War, and the McCarthy era in the United States. These events could not fail to have a major impact on the Institute and provide it with challenges, both ethical and operational, but also with opportunities both for constructive responses and for its own development. Indeed, in important ways they shaped the Institute and its ethos.

In 2017, the Institute again found itself in uncertain times, with what might be dark clouds on the horizon. The presidential executive order, issued on January 27, banning travel and immigration into the United States from seven predominantly Muslim countries, generated great concern and discussion among the Institute’s community drawn each year from all over the world, the majority coming from outside the United States. It and enhanced the international character present from its earliest years with an increasingly diverse academic community. One reaction of the community was to try to understand current developments, and the responses from seven predominantly Muslim countries, generated great concern and discussion among the Institute.

The Institute remains faithful to the mission of disinterested research into fundamental problems, set by its founders, and to the defense of truth and the integrity of knowledge, and it is still committed to selecting its Faculty and Members on the basis of ability and achievements alone. As a consequence, it has retained and enhanced the international character present from its earliest years with an increasingly diverse academic community drawn each year from all over the world, the majority coming from outside the United States. It was natural, therefore, that the Institute condemned the executive order as being contrary to the values of the international community to which we belong, asserting again its commitment to the proposition that “there is no distinction—geographical, political, or religious—must be made among those who work for the advancement of the sciences and humanities.”

Like his uncle, the younger Veblen had also been thinking about the need for research institutes, and, as early as 1923, he had written to Abraham Flexner’s brother, Simon, the founding director of the Rockefeller Institute (now Rockefeller University) to seek his backing. Simon had referred him to Abraham. Veblen had already played a major role in the development of mathematical training both in Princeton and nationally. Even before he was appointed to its Faculty, he was providing guidance on the development of the School of Mathematics, as the Institute’s first School, to Flexner, who confessed that “mathematicians, like cows in the dark, all look alike to me.” Given two such strong-willed and visionary individuals as Flexner and Veblen, tensions were inevitable, and, indeed, they persisted strongly on a number of issues until Flexner stepped down as Director in 1939.

The first of these articles discusses how the ethos of the Institute was shaped at its foundation. In the three moments of conception are, perhaps, necessarily contingent and precarious. Certainly, it was so in the case of the Institute for Advanced Study. For its founders, Louis Bamberger and his sister, Caroline Bamberger Fuld, had other plans when they sent their representatives to Abraham Flexner to ask for advice on how to found a medical school. And, it was only by fortunate timing that the Bambergers had retained the resources to enable them to devote $5 million to the project, because they had sold their business to Macy’s for $11 million in cash, as well as some of Macy’s stock, shortly before the Great Crash of 1929.

But the seed Flexner planted in their minds was not for a school to train physicians; rather, it was set to germinate into his own dream, a new type of institution: an institute for advanced study. Others had also been dreaming such dreams. In the dark days before the end of the First World War, the Norwegian-American economist Thorstein Veblen proposed in his influential book *The Higher Learning in America* that, in order to reestablish international communication between academics after the conflict, an institution should be established in the United States for artists and scholars of all nations to work together. He proposed that this institution as a house of refuge and entertainment, a nice term for the Institute, which, from its earliest days, has provided its Faculty and Members with a refuge from the pressures of the contemporary university, and entertainment in the sense of academic diversion as well as lodging and hospitality.

The Bambergers made it clear from the start that discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or gender was to have no place at the Institute. In their invitation letter to the first Board of Trustees, they wrote on June 4, 1930, “We feel strongly that the spirit characteristic of America at its noblest, above all the pursuit of higher learning, cannot admit of any conditions as to personnel other than those designed to promote the objects for which this institution is established, and particularly with no regard whatever to accidents of race, creed, or sex.” And they stipulated that this applied to the Institute’s staff as much as to its Faculty and Members. The Institute was born just as the Great Depression was deepening and fascist regimes were spreading through parts of Europe. Its early development continued through the Second World War, the beginning of the Cold War, and the McCarthy era in the United States. These events could not fail to have a major impact on the Institute and provide it with challenges, both ethical and operational, but also with opportunities both for constructive responses and for its own development. Indeed, in important ways they shaped the Institute and its ethos.

In 2017, the Institute again found itself in uncertain times, with what might be dark clouds on the horizon. The presidential executive order, issued on January 27, banning travel and immigration into the United States from seven predominantly Muslim countries, generated great concern and discussion among the Institute’s community drawn each year from all over the world, the majority coming from outside the United States. It and enhanced the international character present from its earliest years with an increasingly diverse academic community. One reaction of the community was to try to understand current developments, and the responses from seven predominantly Muslim countries, generated great concern and discussion among the Institute.

The Institute remains faithful to the mission of disinterested research into fundamental problems, set by its founders, and to the defense of truth and the integrity of knowledge, and it is still committed to selecting its Faculty and Members on the basis of ability and achievements alone. As a consequence, it has retained and enhanced the international character present from its earliest years with an increasingly diverse academic community drawn each year from all over the world, the majority coming from outside the United States. It was natural, therefore, that the Institute condemned the executive order as being contrary to the values of the international community to which we belong, asserting again its commitment to the proposition that “there is no distinction—geographical, political, or religious—must be made among those who work for the advancement of the sciences and humanities.”

Like his uncle, the younger Veblen had also been thinking about the need for research institutes, and, as early as 1923, he had written to Abraham Flexner’s brother, Simon, the founding director of the Rockefeller Institute (now Rockefeller University) to seek his backing. Simon had referred him to Abraham. Veblen had already played a major role in the development of mathematical training both in Princeton and nationally. Even before he was appointed to its Faculty, he was providing guidance on the development of the School of Mathematics, as the Institute’s first School, to Flexner, who confessed that “mathematicians, like cows in the dark, all look alike to me.” Given two such strong-willed and visionary individuals as Flexner and Veblen, tensions were inevitable, and, indeed, they persisted strongly on a number of issues until Flexner stepped down as Director in 1939.

The first of these articles discusses how the ethos of the Institute was shaped at its foundation. In the three
The Institute’s Founding Ethos in Our Precarious Present
On scientific progress, the autonomy of scientific research, and the mobility of researchers

Sanctuary Rites
The Institute for Advanced Study came into being at the most inauspicious of times. Founded in the early years of the Great Depression, it took shape during the buildup to the Second World War and under the growing shadow of authoritarian regimes. Its first Director Abraham Flexner published his manifesto on the “The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge” in October 1939, barely a month after the outbreak of hostilities in Europe. Surely this was a daunting moment to defend “the fearless and irresponsible thinker” and advocate for the free expression of knowledge and curiosity. The very adversity of the era, however, also created opportunities for the fledgling institution, primarily in the form of sudden availability of renowned and newly mobile scholars from the upper echelons of the German university system. After expressing initial hesitation, Flexner followed the urging of influential faculty members, particularly the mathematician Oswald Veblen, in seeking to provide a haven for some of these new refugees, a sanctuary tradition continued by Director Frank Aydelotte, Flexner’s successor. In association with the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars (on which Veblen and Flexner served and whose name initially specified German rather than Foreign Scholars), the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Carnegie Foundation, IAS played a leading role in this farsighted, if ever elite, rescue effort.

Veblen, in seeking to provide a haven for some of these new refugees, a sanctuary tradition continued by Director Frank Aydelotte, Flexner’s successor. In association with the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars (on which Veblen and Flexner served and whose name initially specified German rather than Foreign Scholars), the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Carnegie Foundation, IAS played a leading role in this farsighted, if ever elite, rescue effort.

We find ourselves today, nearly nine decades after the Institute’s founding in 1930, at another inauspicious juncture. Global political forces in power from Turkey to the United States are posing serious threats to the autonomy of scientific research and the mobility of researchers, undercutting two cardinal conditions for scientific progress. Wall, fences, bans, blocks, restrictions, cuts, and expulsions are slowly becoming run-of-the-mill terms for us to navigate in an increasingly precarious political landscape.

The conversion of Abraham Flexner
At the end of January 1933, Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany. Over the next two months, the Nazi Party moved quickly to consolidate its power, expanding executive authority through emergency decrees following the Reichstag fire and swiftly moving into a formal dictatorship. An edict in April initiated a purge of civil servants who were of non-Aryan descent or exhibited suspect political sentiments. This law directly impacted German universities, and it had a particularly strong effect in the fields of mathematics and natural sciences, where Jews had enjoyed better prospects of pursuing a scholarly career. As a consequence, many of the country’s strongest intellectual centers lost leading figures in the space of just a few months, including the renowned Mathematical Institute at the University of Göttingen, home of David Hilbert, Richard Courant, Hermann Weyl, and Emmy Noether. This upheaval produced a sudden wave of refugee scholars seeking to emigrate and desperate to find positions elsewhere. It also coincided with the transition of IAS from a concept to an embodied institution, through the founding of the inaugural School of Mathematics.

The crisis of refugee scholars presented Flexner and Veblen with a challenging opportunity. The Institute had already pulled an extraordinary coup in recruiting Albert Einstein and John von Neumann shortly before Hitler’s coming to power. But how far should they continue in recruiting additional émigrés? Flexner initially expressed ambivalence on the topic, torn between a desire to live up to the Institute’s founding ideals and concern over the need to support and foster local talent. As he wrote to Veblen on March 27, 1933: “Mr. Bamberger and Mrs. Fuld were very anxious from the outset that no distinction should be made as respects race, religion, nationality, etc., and of course I am in thorough sympathy with their point of view, but on the other hand if we do not develop America, who is going to do it, and the question arises how much we ought to do for others and how much to make sure that civilization in America advances.” On May 2, again responding to Veblen, he expanded on the same theme:

We are certainly in the devil of a fix. Unable to care for our own younger men, we are pressed by applications from foreign countries. It seems to me...
clear that we must in the first place endeavor to find work for those whom we have encouraged to train themselves in this country on the theory that, if they were worthy, there would be jobs waiting for them. Until we have done that, what else can we do? Our opportunities for making places for foreigners are therefore at the moment limited to a few outstanding personalities such as Einstein and Weyl. . . .

For his part, Veblen pressed for a more active stance, not only advocating that the Institute do all it could, but also endorsing the establishment of a formal network to provide assistance to scholars in need. As he wrote to Flexner on May 5:

Some kind of a committee to raise funds for the purpose of enabling some of them to live and continue their scholarly work in the countries adjacent to Germany or elsewhere might be feasible. The existence of such a committee would in itself be an eloquent protest.

That same month, the Institute of International Education in New York City set up an Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German Scholars (later renamed to include all Foreign Scholars), headed by Edward R. Murrow, to assist scholars fleeing Europe. Veblen would join its board soon thereafter.

Over the course of the ensuing years, Flexner would undergo a conversion, becoming more deeply involved in assistance projects—he followed Veblen into the Emergency Committee—and increasingly willing to mobilize the Institute to this effect. In a 1938 letter to George Birkhoff at Harvard, he insisted that national origin should never stand in the way of higher goals:

Let us keep firmly in front of our eyes our real aim, our time the center of gravity and the methods of its operation: the center of gravity in scholarship moved across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States. It is a grave responsibility which is thus thrust upon us all.

In his Director's Report the following spring, Flexner even cast the matter as heralding a seismic change in the geography of knowledge:

We are living in an epoch-making time. The center of human culture is being shifted under our very eyes. Once it had its home in Athens. A few centuries later it had its home in Italy, a few centuries later in Paris, and thereafter also in Great Britain and Germany. It is now being unmistakably shifted to the United States. The scholars of Europe are refugees driven out of their own countries sometimes for political or religious reasons and sometimes because they are too unhappy and too distracted to pursue the work to which they are giving their lives. They have come to the Institute or have corresponded with the Institute literally by the hundreds. We cannot, of course, undertake either permission, such as to find them places, though we have done something substantial under both heads. Fifty years from now the historian looking backward will, if we act with courage and imagination, report that during our time the center of gravity in scholarship moved across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States. It is a grave responsibility which is thus being thrust upon us all.

From a vantage point almost eighty years later, Flexner’s claim seems more prophetic than hyperbolic. Although the transition in scientific work away from Germany and toward global English may have begun earlier, the center of gravity clearly shifted in the second half of the twentieth century. Germany’s leading share of Nobel Prizes plummeted after the war, even as the number of Americans in the sciences soared (one third of whom were foreign born). From a vantage point almost eighty years later, Flexner’s claim seems more prophetic than hyperbolic. Although the transition in scientific work away from Germany and toward global English may have begun earlier, the center of gravity clearly shifted in the second half of the twentieth century. Germany’s leading share of Nobel Prizes plummeted after the war, even as the number of Americans in the sciences soared (one third of whom were foreign born).

“A Wall of Bureaucratic Measures”

The actual process of reaching the United States was far from simple for most would-be immigrants, who had to navigate not just an ocean, but also a maze of paperwork to obtain the requisite permission to enter and stay. To assist would-be immigrants, Flexner undertook to get them extensive contacts and pulled strings as much as possible. When the mathematical logician Kurt Gödel found himself unable to leave Vienna in October 1939, Flexner contacted the Chief of the visa division at the Department of State to plead on his behalf. Although Gödel had been legally admitted as a permanent resident earlier in the 1930s, he had returned to the annexed country that used to be Austria, and was facing difficulties getting authorization to return to the United States. “Is there anything that the State Department or the Consul General can do,” Flexner asked, “to suggest some helpful method of procedure?” The American authorities answered that the problem seemed to be with German authorities, and so Flexner’s successor Aydelotte contacted the German embassy in Washington, D.C. Eventually Gödel and his wife Adele were permitted to leave. By German directive they traveled east instead of west, avoiding British surveillance, and then eventually getting to Japan in 1940, where they found a boat to San Francisco.

Even after refugees succeeded in reaching the United States, they needed to stay bureaucratically alert, and often required assistance. Under the Alien Registration Act of 1940, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service collected fingerprints and required noncitizens to record all changes of address. Even local authorities would insist on insisting that, for example, Gödel, once finally settled in Princeton, had to request permission to travel with his wife to visit a doctor in New York City in January 1942. They always went by train, Gödel assured the U.S. Attorney, and returned on the same day. Three weeks later, Aydelotte’s secretary sent a follow-up plea, noting, “If you could grant them this permission promptly it would be a great help to them and would be very much appreciated.”

The IAS faced other hurdles in its attempts to assist refugee scholars, including the criteria established by the very bodies seeking to provide aid. The case of Ernst Kapp illustrates the poignant complications involved. In 1937, Kapp, an eminent classics scholar, lost his position in Hamburg due to his liberal beliefs and his wife’s classification as “non-Aryan.” Already in England for a visit to Oxford, Kapp managed to get himself to New York by 1939, and began desperately seeking a position. At IAS, the art historian Erwin Panofsky and Aydelotte sought to assist him, contacting possible means of support. After extensive efforts Kapp managed to find an instructorship at the Sophie Newcomb Memorial College for women at Tulane University in New Orleans, but it only paid $750 a year, not the $2,000 required to receive the necessary visa. The Oberlaender Trust offered an additional $650, and Panofsky wrote to the Emergency Committee to plead for the remainder. This last-minute success only brought a year’s reprieve, and more than two hundred applications later he still had nothing; classics were not in demand. Moreover, he fell between the cracks of the Emergency Committee’s efforts: Aydelotte discovered when trying to assist him, the School’s University in Exile had no room for scholars who were already in the United States. Kapp returned to New York for a temporary editing project. At the end of 1940, Aydelotte noted that despite potential support from the Emergency Committee and others, scholars were lost without an institutional home:

All that Kapp needs is an appointment with some institution that the institution can make a request for these contributions. In addition, I think some of Kapp’s friends would, if necessary, put up small sums such as they could afford (from $10 to $25 a month each) to ensure a modest livelihood for him. Kapp is not eligible for Dr. Alvin Johnson’s scheme because he is already in this country. The fact is that if he does not get some help he will not be here long, for he is likely to starve to death. He is at the moment down almost to his last dollar.

Again, Kapp found last-minute rescue in the form of an unorthodox appointment at Columbia, partly subverted by the Emergency Committee.

The Institute’s most famous scholar in exile, Albert Einstein, underscored the unending hassles that hindered attempts to welcome foreign scholars in a letter he wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt on July 26, 1941:

A policy is now being pursued in the State Department which makes it all but impossible to give refuge in America to many worthy persons who are the victims of Fascist cruelty in Europe. Of course, this is not openly avowed by the responsible for it. The method which is being used, however, is to make immigration impossible by erecting a wall of bureaucratic measures alleged to be necessary to protect America against subversive, dangerous, elements.

A Call for Vigilance

As we immersed ourselves in the thicket of correspondence at the heart of the Institute’s archives, the sense of urgency expressed by scholars like Flexner, Veblen, Gödel, Aydelotte, Einhorn, Kapp, and others resonated deeply. Their notes and exchanges, not to mention the Emergency Committee that Flexner and Veblen served on, had an unsettling contemporary ring to them. This part of the Institute’s history testifies to the individual courage of these men and women who extended a helping hand and built institutional networks to provide sanctuary for displaced refugees. In doing so, they overcame the nationalist siege mentality that would have been to ward off. An unintended conse
Emmy Noether’s Paradise

How IAS helped support the first female professor in Germany when she became a displaced refugee

T o Albert Einstein, she was “the most significant creative mathematical genius thus far produced since the higher education of women began.” More straightforward in his praise, Einstein’s fellow Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study, Hermann Weyl, called her “a great woman mathematician […] indeed” the greatest that history has known.” It was April 1935, and Einstein and Weyl were each paying tribute to a recently deceased colleague who had, like them, fled Nazi persecution across the Atlantic only two years earlier. Her name was Emmy Noether, and her short but remarkable life left an indelible mark not only on the history of mathematics, but also on that of IAS in its critical first years.

A Woman in Göttingen

Amalie Emmy Noether was born in 1882 into an affluent family from the Bavarian town of Erlangen. She followed her father’s footsteps to study mathematics at the University of Erlangen and, in 1907, she became the second woman to obtain a Ph.D. in mathematics from a German university. A female maverick in a man’s world, Noether taught for several years without pay before being invited, in 1915, to join the University of Göttingen, home to the most prestigious mathematics department in the world at the time. She lectured for other professors and was only allowed to pass her habilitation following the collapse of the Kaiserreich and sweeping university reforms in 1919. Noether became an adjunct professor in 1922—the first female professor in Germany—but only started receiving a modest compensation for her teaching the following year. Despite international recognition, she never obtained a permanent position in Göttingen, and her situation took a turn for the worst with the rise to power of the Nazi party. In 1932, she was denounced by a neighbor as a “Marxist Jewess” and had to leave her apartment. Despite international recognition, she never obtained a permanent position in Göttingen, and her situation took a turn for the worst with the rise to power of the Nazi party. In 1932, she was denounced by a neighbor as a “Marxist Jewess” and had to leave her apartment. The following year, she was removed from all teaching duties at the university and was eventually forced to flee Germany like many other purged academics.

Emmy Noether’s Paradise

How IAS helped support the first female professor in Germany when she became a displaced refugee

A Most Significant Creative Mathematical Genius

It was during her years in Göttingen that Emmy Noether developed an international reputation as a formidable mathematician. She made seminal contributions to the field of “abstract algebra,” where she identified a simple, yet elegant, property of number systems, which proved instrumental in the study of arithmetic and geometric phenomena such as prime decomposition and dimension. Noether brought similar clarity to her pioneering research in physics, where she understood the relationship between symmetries of the laws of nature and the notion of “conservation laws.” As an illustration, consider the “principle of energy conservation,” a paradigmatic conservation law, which states that the total “energy” of an isolated system cannot change. When a car accelerates, for instance, its energy increases, implying that it must have drawn energy from somewhere, according to the principle of energy conservation (in this case, from burning gasoline). On the other hand, consider “time–translation invariance,” a fundamental symmetry of the laws of nature, which states that an experiment performed today would give the same outcome if performed tomorrow: the speed of a free-falling cannonball is the same now as it was in the time of Galileo. Noether was able to connect these two seemingly unrelated concepts: energy conservation comes from time–translation invariance and vice versa. Scientists had long known the connection between energy and time, but Noether was the first to theorize a systematic correspondence: symmetries and conservation laws are related, in general. The idea arose out of a debate between David Hilbert, Felix Klein, and Albert Einstein over the notion of energy in Einstein’s recently formulated general theory of relativity. Noether’s theorem not only laid this controversy to rest, but, due to its striking generality, has been widely used in many other fields of physics, perhaps most notably in the study of elementary particles.

Rethinking the Scholar’s Paradise in the 1930s

Emmy Noether was thus already a household name among mathematicians when Yeben approached Flexner about supporting her in the United States. Their personal correspondence reveals how the Institute was forced to reconsider its mission in the face of unprece-dented assaults on scholars of German-Jewish origin. Noether’s position at Bryn Mawr was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation (as part of their $1.5 million aid package
for displaced scholars) but was only temporary. At Veblen’s invitation, she began giving weekly lectures at the Institute as a Visitor in the School of Mathematics, where she joined the first cohort of IAS Members. Noether was happy to be at the Institute—and not at Princeton’s “men’s university, where nothing female is admitted,” as she once said—but she didn’t receive any honorariums for her lectures, unlike seventeen other occasional visiting lecturers, all male, who spoke at the Institute throughout the 1930s. On the other hand, Veblen did request a “small grant-in-aid,” to help keep her at Bryn Mawr through 1935 and 1936, on the grounds of “Miss Noether’s unique position in the world as the only woman mathematician of the first rank.” Flexner was sympathetic to Noether’s plight, but worried about the Institute overcommitting, and he repeatedly encouraged Veblen to view the question as an administrator (a crucial step, in his opinion, in establishing a credible system of faculty governance). Flexner wondered what such a short-term commitment could achieve and expressed concern at the Institute doing any more than it already had for German scholars, as it needed to be “careful not to be seen as a scholar and yours seems to be a plumber, I suggest that as a team we would be tremendously successful. We can then be possessed by both knowledge and independence. I am ready to change the name of my firm to Einstein and Stanley Plumbing Co.” Einstein was only half-joking, however, when he issued his statement. The physicist sincerely considered that the political climate in the country was becoming increasingly hostile to scientists and teachers. Our own troubled times have many aspects in common with the dreadful period of the McCarthy investigations: the attacks on the freedom of academics, teachers, and the press, the silencing and censorship of government workers, the idea that the United States is threatened by certain creeds. It is worth describing the dire sequence of past events, and learning from Einstein’s clarion cry and courageous response to them, in order to best address the present situation.

A Campaign of Untruth

On February 9, 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy from Wisconsin announced that he had a list of 205 workers of the State Department who were members of the Communist Party. The next day, a journalist asked to see the list. But McCarthy could not find it; his explanation was that he had left it in another suit. The Senate committee that was created to investigate these claims concluded a few months later that McCarthy’s accusations represented “perhaps the most nefarious campaign of half-truths and untruth in the history of this republic.” Historians are now sure there never was such a list. Nevertheless, at the time, mainstream Republicans ignored the findings of the Senate committee. They saw McCarthy’s tactics as something that would help them take control of the White House, after a sixteen-year absence. They invited him to meetings where he ranted about them. But McCarthy’s power was much enhanced. During a speech on the Senate floor, he piled hundreds of documents on a table, claiming they contained evidence of the infiltration. No one was permitted to examine them. McCarthy was nominated Chair of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, and he extended the loyalty inquisition to many sectors, foremost among them, the nation’s educational system. As a former president of the University of Chicago noted, “The entire teaching profession of the U.S. is now intimidated.”

References

IAS, Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center; Veblen-Flexner correspondence (Director’s Office: Faculty files: Box 32; Veblen, 1934–35); Flexner “The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge” (lecture given at Bryn Mawr College on June 2, 1937, https://library. ias.edu/files/UsefulnessOfUselessKnowledge.pdf); list of occasional lecturers from 1930s (Beatrice Stern research files: Vertical file: Box 4: “M”).


Einstein, Plumbers, and McCarthyism

Einstein’s response to a political climate increasingly hostile to scientists and teachers I n November 1954, Albert Einstein wrote a letter to a magazine in which he declared that, were he a young man again, he would not try to become a scientist: “I would rather choose to be a plumber or a peddler in the hope to find that modest degree of independence still available under present circumstances.” Around the United States, plumbers responded. The famous physicist was offered membership in the Chicago plumbers union, and Stanley Murray, a New York plumber, wrote to him: “Since my ambition has always been to be a scholar and yours seems to be a plumber, I suggest that as a team we would be tremendously successful. We can then be possessed by both knowledge and independence. I am ready to change the name of my firm to Einstein and Stanley Plumbing Co.”

The reactionary politicians have managed to instill suspicion of all intellectual efforts into the public by dangling before their eyes a danger from without. Having succeeded so far, they are now proceeding to suppress the freedom of teaching
and to deprive of their positions all those who do not prove submissive, i.e., to starve them.

Einstein strongly advised the teacher to refuse to testify any longer. He should be prepared, Einstein wrote, “for the sacrifice of his personal welfare in the interest of the cultural welfare of his country.” The physicist added, “This kind of inquisition violates the spirit of the Constitution. If enough people are ready to take this grave step, they will be successful. If not, then the intellectuals of this country deserve nothing better than the slavery which is intended for them.” When Frauenglass and Einstein met in Princeton a few days later, Einstein said he himself was ready to go to jail for these principles. Frauenglass followed his advice. As was foreseen, he was fired from his job, but nevertheless thanked the scientist for a “historic letter”. “Its echoes are still reverberating throughout the world.”

The Right to Search for Truth

McCarthy was quick to react to Einstein’s stand. He told the media that whether his “name is Einstein or John Jones,” the giver of such advice was undoubtedly “an enemy of America,” “a disloyal American,” and “not a good American.” But Einstein was in no way deterred. In remarks he made to an assembly of lawyers, he continued to criticize practices “which have become incomprehensible to the rest of civilized mankind and exposed our country to ridicule.” And he warned, “The existence and validity of human rights are not written in the stars.”

Einstein was concerned about the curtailing of academic freedom. In a public statement in March 1954, he advocated for “the right to search for truth and to publish and teach what one holds to be true.” He regretted that in this dark age “freedom of teaching, mutual exchange of opinions, and freedom of press and other media of communication are encroached upon or obstructed,” adding that “this is a state of affairs which a democratic government cannot survive in the long run.”

For some, these statements were proof of Einstein’s disloyalty and continued foreignness—he the German Jew who had been granted American citizenship in 1940. In March 1954, a woman from Los Angeles wrote to the Director of the Institute for Advanced Study: “The man needs lessons in Americanism. I have no patience with this idea that a person who has performed a great deed or discovered something, should be excused from what citizens of U.S.A. must conform to, or that they need not account for questionable acts of theirs.” A man from New York City put it more bluntly: “I suggest he move to Russia—and soon! We don’t need him.”

The Director of the Institute at the time, Robert Oppenheimer, himself a target of McCarthy’s inquisition, remained steadfast in his support of his famous colleague. Six months later, in December 1954, McCarthy was finally “condemned” by a large majority of his Senate colleagues for “contemptuous” and “reprehensible” conduct. Of course, Einstein’s actions did not by themselves cause McCarthy’s downfall. But they certainly facilitated it, by reaffirming essential principles that date back to the Enlightenment, and by empowering many others to keep up the continuing fight to protect democracy.

References


Albert Einstein, Answers to the Questions of the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, March 10, 1954 (Director’s Office: Faculty files; Box 9; Einstein, Albert - Emergency Civil Liberties Committee; Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center, Institute for Advanced Study).

Two letters to the Director of the IAS, March 11, 1954 (ibid.).


The Institute for Advanced Study hired the Hungarian mathematician John von Neumann on January 28, 1933. Two days later, Adolf Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany. This correspondence between von Neumann and Institute founding Director Abraham Flexner illustrates how the political context was on their minds as they discussed their academic projects.
Recruiting scholars from Europe was not always easy, as shown by the protracted negotiations for the appointment of Hermann Weyl, Professor of Mathematics in Göttingen, in 1932. Weyl suffered from depression and was reluctant to emigrate to the United States. In a first cable to Flexner that arrived on January 4, 1933, he signaled his willingness to join the Institute: “Doubts vanquished Stop If you still trust me and want me, this time I accept irrevocably. Ask letter from third [of January] back unopened.” But he changed his mind the very next day, explaining that he “couldn’t leave his home country,” and further adding in a third cable: “Despair over and over again about my suitability for Institute. My activity bound to mother tongue. Open the letter from the third [of January]. Set me free if still possible.” Weyl had another change of heart after Hitler’s rise to power and was eventually able to flee Germany with his Jewish wife and children to join the Institute in autumn 1933. At the same time, Albert Einstein was crossing the Atlantic en route to the Institute. Director Flexner urged him to refrain from making any political statements in the United States.
Correspondence between Flexner and Veblen

At first Abraham Flexner was reluctant to further open the Institute to foreign scholars, except "outstanding personages such as Weyl and Einstein," despite the founders' concern that "no distinction should be made as respects race, religion, nationality." Flexner said it would impede the development of science in the Unites States and foster resentment among American scholars. In contrast, Faculty member Oswald Veblen advocated for vigorous action in favor of refugee academics.
Amalie Emmy Noether

Born in 1882, Amalie Emmy Noether was a groundbreaking German mathematician, known in particular for her theorem relating symmetries to conservation laws. Following the Nazis' rise to power, she was fired from the University of Göttingen. Thanks to Oswald Veblen and others, she was able to come to the United States, where she taught at Bryn Mawr and was a Visitor at the Institute. She died suddenly in 1935, prompting Albert Einstein and Hermann Weyl to herald her as one of the greatest mathematicians of all time.
The Institute’s Activism in Favor of Displaced Scholars

The Institute quickly stepped up its activism in favor of displaced scholars, joining forces with other organizations such as the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars (originally called the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German Scholars). In his final board meeting as Director in 1939, Abraham Flexner acknowledged that the choice of helping foreign academics had been a good one. This action was intensified during the war by Director Frank Aydelotte, giving an added meaning to the “usefulness” of the research conducted at the Institute.
Helping scholars who had been forced to flee Europe was often tricky. Each aid scheme had its limitations, as illustrated by the case of classical scholar Ernst Kapp, who did not fit in the scholar-in-exile program as he was already in the United States when he sought help.
Austrian mathematician Kurt Gödel had fled Vienna with his wife Adele in 1940, crossing Russia, Japan, and the Pacific to finally reach Princeton, where he was offered a position at the Institute. In the following years, he was considered an “enemy alien” and had to ask for special authorization each time he wished to leave town. This did not deter U.S. authorities from calling him up for military service, prompting IAS Director Frank Aydelotte to reveal Gödel’s psychiatric condition to the Service Selection Board.
Displaced Children Visit Einstein

_Displaced Children Visit Einstein—DP youngsters recently arrived from Europe pay a birthday call on Prof. Albert Einstein at his Princeton, N.J. home. The famous scientist was 70 years old on March 14. Leonora Aragona, 5, sits on Einstein's lap. Spokesman for the visitors was Elizabeth Kernek, 11 (second from left), a cousin of Dr. Einstein, who met him for the first time._
Einstein was very active during McCarthyism, campaigning in favor of intellectual freedom and supporting victims of anti-Communist purges. The Institute received letters denouncing his actions, sometimes in surprisingly violent terms.
Before joining the Institute as a faculty member in 1974, Albert O. Hirschman was already a veteran of many political struggles on both sides of the Atlantic. Here we see the fake ID with which he fled France in 1941, after having helped journalist Varian Fry organize the escape of some 2000 people from Europe. (Documents on this panel courtesy of Katia Salomon, Hirschman Family Collection; and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.)
Hirschman's influential work on the emergence of authoritarian regimes in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s brought him into contact with Latin American scholars who themselves suffered under those regimes. After joining the Institute as a Professor in 1974, Hirschman recruited many of those scholars, including the influential sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso, later president of Brazil. He also helped academics and student activists opposed to Franco's regime in Spain, including sociologist Victor M. Perez-Diaz, who came to Princeton as a Member in the newly founded School of Social Science in 1975–76. The launching of the School two years earlier with Hirschman and anthropologist Clifford Geertz at its helm signaled the Institute's continued engagement with contemporary social and political issues.

During the last few years of Hirschman's influential work on the emergence of authoritarian regimes in Latin America, his contact with Latin American scholars who themselves suffered under those regimes. After joining the Institute as a Professor in 1974, Hirschman recruited many of those scholars, including the influential sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso, later president of Brazil. He also helped academics and student activists opposed to Franco's regime in Spain, including sociologist Victor M. Perez-Diaz, who came to Princeton as a Member in the newly founded School of Social Science in 1975–76. The launching of the School two years earlier with Hirschman and anthropologist Clifford Geertz at its helm signaled the Institute's continued engagement with contemporary social and political issues.