A REFUGE FOR SCHOLARS

Present Challenges in Historical Perspective

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY
HISTORY WORKING GROUP
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A House of Refuge</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Institute's Founding Ethos in Our Precarious Present</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmy Noether's Paradise</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Einstein, Plumbers, and McCarthyanism</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibit: A Scholar's Paradise, in the World</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence between Flexner and von Neumann</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexner's Correspondence with Einstein and Weyl</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence between Flexner and Veblen</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amalie Emmy Noether</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Institute's Activism in Favor of Displaced Scholars</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernst Kapp</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurt Gödel</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displaced Children Visit Einstein</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Einstein and McCarthyism</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert O. Hirschman</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Institute's Continued Engagement</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

※
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 Oeschma, 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; Maria Tiepa, Digital Scholarship Software Support Specialist; Maria 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 scientists and scholars of all nations to work together toward the public good. This institution would be dedicated 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 in 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. One reaction of the community was to try to understand current developments, and the 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. One reaction of the community was to try to understand current developments, and the responses and for its own development. Indeed, in important ways they shaped the Institute and its ethos.

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 has provided its Faculty and Members with a refuge from the pressures of the contemporary university, and in entertainment in the sense of academic diversion as well as lodging and hospitality.

The first two professors he signed up for the new Faculty in 1932 were Albert Einstein and Oswald Veblen, a mathematician at Princeton University and the nephew of Thorstein. Einstein, of course, had felt impelled to leave Germany by the rise of Nazism. When he and his wife arrived in the United States in October 1933 to take up his post at the Institute, Flexner arranged for them to be taken off the SS *Waltert* quietly before it reached New York harbor, partly for security reasons.
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 faculty members, particularly the mathematician Oswald Veblen, he expanded on the same theme:

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 scientific progress. Walls, 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.

Travel restrictions involving pure accidents of birth, documented by passports from flagged countries, have prompted us to revisit today the Institute’s history not because we believe that history repeats itself. Rather, we seek to provide the IAS community with sketches of scholarly lives and scientific cultures, interrupted by nationalist forces of exclusion. That these lives and cultures managed to reconstitute themselves and enrich our common human heritage is thanks only to efforts to provide them with sanctuary.

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 emigrés? Flexner initially expressed ambivalence on the topic, torn between a desire to live up to the Institute’s founding ethos and concern over the need to support for our own younger men, we are pressed by applications from foreign countries. It seems to me

The Institute’s Founding Ethos in Our Precarious Present

On scientific progress, the autonomy of scientific research, and the mobility of researchers

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

ARTICLES

Letter from a plumber, Stanley Murray, to Albert Einstein, offering to go into business with him. See page 13.

The Albert Einstein Archives, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem
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:

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 to give them permission, since, as Einstein said, if Goedel, 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. Goedel 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 classicist, 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. 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, Einstein, and Veblen served on, had an unsettling contemporary relevance. 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, Einstein, and Veblen served on, had an unsettling contemporary relevance.

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, Einstein, Aydelotte, Veblen, 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 siegel-montierung, and whether they are mathematicians or fruit pickers, as a threat to be warded off: An unintended conse
quence of their acts was the shifting of the center of intellectual research from Germany to the United States, enriching the country that gave them refuge. Their individual initiatives and collective endeavors provide us with much-needed exemplars of moral fortitude. It only took a few months and one edict purging civil servants of non-Aryan descent or exhibiting activities that would be seen as a call for vigilance in the face of policies such as travel bans and immigrant deportations, as well as attempts to curb scientific inquiry and cut funding to arts and humanities endowments that now threaten the autonomy of research and the pursuit of a dignified human life. Unfortunately, history suggests it takes much less time to destroy than to build. As it did in the 1930s, the Institute can play a leading symbolic role in our contemporary predicament.

References
(Unless otherwise noted, from the Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center, Institute for Advanced Study)

Letter from Flexner to Veblen, March 27, 1933 (Director’s Office: Faculty files: Box 32: Veblen, Oswald, 1933).
Letter from Flexner to Veblen, May 2, 1933 (ibid.).
Letter from Veblen to Flexner, May 5, 1933 (ibid.).
Letter from Flexner to George Birkhoff, Harvard University, September 1938 (Director’s Office: General files: Box 8: Birkhoff, George D.).
Letter from Flexner to Warren (Chief, Visa Division, Department of State), October 4, 1939 (Director’s Office: Faculty files: Box 14: Gödel, Kurt – Visa-Immigration).
Letter from Johnson (New School) to Aydelotte, September 23, 1940 (ibid.).
Letter from Aydelotte to Seelye (ECADFS), December 24, 1940 (ibid.).
Letter from Kurt Gödel to United States Attorney, Trenton, January 8, 1942 (Director’s Office: Faculty files: Box 14: Gödel, Kurt – Visa-Immigration).
Letter from Aydelotte’s secretary to the same United States Attorney, January 29, 1942 (ibid.).

Board Minutes, Abraham Flexner, Director’s Report, May 22, 1939 (Board of Trustees records: Minutes: Box 4: Minutes of Regular Meeting).


Letter from Aydelotte to Seelye (ECADFS), December 24, 1940 (ibid.).
Letter from Kapp, Ernst.
Letter from Aydelotte to Seelye (ECADFS), December 24, 1940 (ibid.).

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 Kaisermath 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. 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. Thanks to the intervention of the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German Scholars (set up in 1933 by the Institute for International Education in New York City) Noether was able to take a temporary position at Bryn Mawr College. Once in Pennsylvania, she reconnected with her former Göttingen colleague Weyl, herself freshly recruited to the Institute for Advanced Study by its first Director Abraham Flexner and resident Professor Oswald Veblen and Einstein.

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 Veblen 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 academic freedom. 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 ofIAS 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 what it already had for German scholars, as it needed to be “careful not to create the impression that [it was] overlooking Americans in order to help these unfortunate foreigners.” Sidestepping the thorny issue of nationality, Veblen was eventually able to secure a $1,500 grant and continued soliciting larger donations for a “permanent commitment on the part of the Institute.” As he put it, Noether was not merely unique as a “woman mathematician,” she offered the Institute an opportunity to create the impression that “[it was] overlooking Americans” such as the IAS, or Göttingen before it, can be

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.iias.edu/files/UsefulnessOfUselessKnowledge.pdf); list of occasional lecturers from 1930s (Beatrice Stern research files: Vertical file: Box 4: “M”).


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 1906. 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 - 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.).


Correspondence between Flexner and von Neumann

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.
Being a refugee scholar in 1940s United States was a bureaucratic nightmare. 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

This clipping from Ottawa, Canada Evening Journal on March 15, 1949:

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 Aragones, 5, sits on Einstein’s lap. Spokesman for the visitors was Elizabeth Kerek, 11 (second from left), a cousin of Dr. Einstein, who met him for the first time.
Einstein and McCarthyism

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.