10 | *The Micro-politics of International Commissions*
The Case of Telegraphic Standards

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If our aim is to pluralise the 'subjects, methods, and aims' of the academic study of international organisations,[1] then one fairly obvious route to follow is the route of historicisation. But what exactly does historicisation entail, and what added value can it bring to the study of international organisations? This is not always clear. Historians of international organisations have elected a variety of avenues to relate the creation and the design of international institutions to the industrial-capitalist functions they were intended to serve,[2] the diplomatic crises they were intended to solve,[3] the technocratic intellectual legacies of their emergence,[4] and their continuities with imperial forms of governance.[5] Methodologically, accounting for its breadth and strength, this work is characterised by eclecticism and diversity rather than uniformity.[6]

The present chapter aims in this context to illustrate the distinctive contribution of historicisation to our understanding of international organisations. I follow the overall impetus outlined by the editors in two ways. On the one hand, the chapter offers another tool to the methodological toolkit on display across the present volume; on

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[1] Introduction to this volume.

[2] C. N. Murphy, *International Organization and Industrial Change: Global Governance Since 1850* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

[3] G. Sluga, *The Invention of International Order: Remaking Europe after Napoleon* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

[4] J. Steffek, *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

[5] J. Morefield, *Covenants without Swords: Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

[6] For an excellent discussion of this diversity see, E. J. Ravndal, 'Colonies, Semi-sovereigns, and Great Powers: IGO Membership Debates and the Transition of the International System' (2020) 46 *Review of International Studies* 278–98.

the other hand and more specifically, I want to think about what international organisations are from the point of view of their making. To do so, I zoom in on one important moment in the history of modern international organisations: the 1865 commission whose chief purpose it was to determine, at the International Telegraph Conference (ITC) in Paris, the scope and purpose of the first formal and permanent international organisation, the International Telegraph Union (ITU).

Building on previous histories of international organisations, I approach this case through the lens of *micro-politics*, combining biographical and sociological methods. Methodologically I study international organisations by means of biographical membership analysis; theoretically I argue that international organisations cannot be fully understood in separation from the situated political motives of their makers. Below I first outline what a lens of micro-politics entails, and what its methodological consequences are. Second, I sketch out the historical context of mid-nineteenth-century technical international cooperation. Third, I present a micro-political analysis of the 1865 commission. I conclude with some observations for the study of international organisations more broadly.

Micro-politics and Commissions

International commissions, if understood as prototypical international organisations, can be thought of as performances of global governance *avant la lettre*: their choices about membership, qualifications, and the output they generate all reflect certain historically specific understandings of what kinds of social capital are politically valuable, what symbols reflect status, and what acts and actions require special legitimation for whom. We can therefore study them in terms of who lays claim to what, who such a claim is addressed to, and what form of political action gets legitimised as a result. In order to study these inherently subjective influences upon the scope and authority of international organisations, however, extant approaches largely based on rationalist and critical varieties of functionalism are insufficient. Instead I wish to foreground the contingency involved in the making and situating of new organisations, in a space as indeterminate and contested as 'the international'. To do this I argue that we need to pay attention to and indeed follow the individual

practitioners concretely invested in the institutionalisation of particular modes of governance.

Attention to practitioners is largely in line with relatively recent trends in the study of international organisations, in both international law and international relations. Scholars from both disciplines have participated in a 'practice turn', which emphasises the performative work at the heart of claims to authority within and between institutional contexts. Vincent Pouliot, for example, applies theoretical insights from the work of Pierre Bourdieu to the study of performed hierarchy and status behaviour in the context of international organisations.[7] Marieke Louis and Lucile Maertens develop a similarly sociological analytical framework for studying the depoliticising work of international organisations.[8] Annabelle Littoz-Monnet makes a strong case for zooming in on the concrete interventions of expert actors operating in delineated policy fields within international organisations.[9] All four scholars share reservations about functionalist conceptions of international organisations, their scope, and their political authority. I build on their work and characterise the underlying orientation as 'micro-political'. Micro-politics is a relatively under-conceptualised shorthand for small-scale political behaviour that gets overlooked for various reasons, whether methodological or theoretical.[10] In the case of international organisations, we may for instance overdetermine the functional purpose apparently fulfilled by an institution and therefore pay little attention to the political contestation involved in defining and prioritising this purpose.

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[7] V. Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[8] M. Louis and L. Maertens, *Why International Organizations Hate Politics: Depoliticizing the World* (Routledge, 2021).

[9] A. Littoz-Monnet, 'Expert Knowledge as a Strategic Resource: International Bureaucrats and the Shaping of Bioethical Standards' (2017) 61 *International Studies Quarterly* 584–95; A. Littoz-Monnet, 'Exclusivity and Circularity in the Production of Global Governance Expertise: The Making of "Global Mental Health" Knowledge' (2022) 16 *International Political Sociology* olab035.

[10] P. S. Mann, *Micro-politics: Agency in a Postfeminist Era* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 1. C. Dörrenbächer, Christoph, and M. Geppert. 'Micro-politics and Conflicts in Multinational Corporations: Current Debates, Re-framing, and Contributions of This Special Issue' (2006) 12, no. 3 *Journal of International Management* 251–65; R. Willner, 'Micro-politics: An Underestimated Field of Qualitative Research in Political Science' (2011) 7 *German Policy Studies* 155–85.

For this chapter I define micro-politics as *interpersonal instances of contestation*, whether performed through speech, disruptive action, repetition, or otherwise. A micro-political study of international organisations demands that we zoom in on individual practitioners, their backgrounds, experiences, and preferences, as well as the social networks they are a part of. The key assumption of a micro-political lens is that identifying the characteristics and emphasising the conditional agency of practitioners working for international organisations allows for inferences about the character and scope of such organisations. Sociological analysis of practices and networks, but also biographical information about individual trajectories followed by practitioners, then provides significant clues about two central questions for non-functionalist work on international organisations: (a) what international organisations are, other than responses to functional need and (b) how international organisations produce authority relations.

Following the practitioners through a micro-political lens can go different ways; for purposes of clarity I distinguish three. First, sociological international-relations scholars have studied the intra-institutional activities, initiatives, and interventions of individual policy-makers, lawyers, civil servants, advisors, and others working for international organisations. Here we can trace, as Marieke Louis and Lucile Maertens have recently done, the distinct pathways and strategies followed by permanent and non-permanent staff dealing with problems of international cooperation.[11] This option is particularly well-geared towards contemporary research and works well with e.g. ethnographic methods such as participant observation. Second, we might want to look for the past socialisation that individual practitioners bring to the governance process: the extent to which, for instance, a practitioner's education affects their policy preferences and strategies they later adopt once working for an international organisation. This avenue is popular among sociological work deploying social network analysis, but for obvious reasons also works well for historically oriented scholarship.[12]

A third option is to apply the second approach to a separate moment in the life of an institution: its inception. Here we are able to connect

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[11] Louis and Maertens, *Why International Organizations Hate Politics*.

[12] For an excellent application of this approach see A. Hoffmann, 'The Transnational and the International: From Critique of Statism to Transversal Lines' (2022) 35 *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 796–810.

biographical backgrounds, intellectual formation, and political context in order to draw some – if limited – inferences about the contestation, political ambitions, and expectations involved in the establishment of a given organisation. Jens Steffek's recent intellectual history of modern international organisations is a good example here, and indeed there is much that students of international organisations can learn from intellectual-historical methods more generally. By tracing the careers of individual thinkers and practitioners, Steffek is able to tell us how the intellectual influences and previous practical engagements of individual pioneers in international organisations have shaped their technocratic preferences and as such significantly influenced modern conceptions of the scope and authority of international organisations more widely.[13]

The third avenue thus invites us to combine biographical and socio-logical intuitions about the micro-politics of international organisations. I pursue this avenue for two main reasons. On the one hand, empirically we simply know more about the inner life of a fully fledged international organisation than we do about those early founding moments. On the other, our conceptual, analytical, and theoretical horizons are affected by this empirical basis: currently a rational-functional understanding of institutional design and creation dominates scholarship. If we wish to historicise this literature we need to relax our assumptions – my approach, as I aim to show in the remainder of this chapter, is able to do so.

A micro-political approach also has consequences for how we conceptualise authority. While there is disagreement as to how exactly authority and legitimacy relate,[14] for present purposes I pragmatically define international authority as '*power taken to be legitimate*'.[15] This places emphasis on recognition and audiences and takes no stance on how successful a given claim to legitimacy may be. I adopt a relational position that sees authority as an ever-contested relationship arising from interaction.[16] On this view authority needs to be *produced* in the

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[13] Steffek, *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia.*

[14] See, M. Zürn, *A Theory of Global Governance. Authority, Legitimacy, and Contestation* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

[15] J. Kustermans and R. Horemans, 'Four Conceptions of Authority in International Relations' (2021) 76 *International Organisation* 204–28, 3; emphasis original.

[16] J. Costa Lopez, 'Political Authority in International Relations: Revisiting the Medieval Debate' (2020) 74 *International Organization* 222–52, 226–28.

first place, meaning it is historically contingent.[17] Julia Costa Lopez notes the central role of 'constant (re)authorization' in this context. On her view, authority relies on semantic fields that get deployed to 'reauthorize authority' – 'these categories and their variability are central to understand the production and evolution of authority itself'.[18] A relational view is a useful starting point for thinking about how authority relations are produced.

Zooming in on the micro-politics of historical international commissions – of their composition and of their interventions – puts processes of legitimation centre-stage. Methodologically, to foreground the social production of authority relations inherent in decisions about institutional design, rather than study design at an abstract level I combine biographical and sociological methods. This allows me to zoom in on membership composition as a particular aspect of institutional design.

Telegraphs in the Nineteenth Century

Building upon recent work on nineteenth-century international organisations[19] I examine how, and in response to what historical currents, the ITC assumed the specific shape it did. The nineteenth century is crucial here as a period during which technical international institutions proliferated in parallel to the acceleration of industrial capitalism, imperial expansion, and technocratic conceptions of political institutions. Let me briefly outline this historical context in more detail before I turn to the ITC as a key example of that context.

In 1837, the first overland electric telegraph line was laid from London to Birmingham, replacing the optical telegraph system of semaphores with a more efficient and less easily sabotaged means of

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[17] See, O. J. Sending, *The Politics of Expertise: Competing for Authority in Global Governance* (University of Michigan Press, 2015).

[18] Costa Lopez, 'Revisiting the Medieval Debate', 229. Consider the authorisation of great powers by naming them, E. Keene, 'The Naming of Powers' (2013) 48 *Cooperation and Conflict* 268–82.

[19] D. Howland, 'An Alternative Mode of International Order: The International Administrative Union in the Nineteenth Century' (2014) 41 *Review of International Studies* 161–83; J. Yao, *The Ideal River: How Control of Nature Shaped the International Order* (Manchester University Press, 2021); Ravndal, *Colonies, semi-sovereigns, and Great Power*; Sluga, *The Invention of the International Order*.

communication. During the second half of the 1840s, lines proliferated and interconnected at dizzying speeds. The demand for administrative integration grew: in 1848, Prussia alone had to conclude a total of fifteen conventions with other German states just to link Berlin's cables to its own borders. Telegraph standards were multilaterally negotiated at the Austro-German Telegraph Union (AGTU), created in 1849, and the French-led Western European Telegraph Union (WETU), created in 1855. In 1864 the French Imperial Government invited all countries with a telegraph administration (excluding those, like Britain, where telegraphs were in private hands) to settle international telegraphic standards. Twenty countries confirmed their attendance, including the Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires. Representatives gathered in Paris to vote on a proposal, put forth by a Commission of Special Delegates, for a single ITU. The conference set technical standards for telegraphs including Morse code, uniform instructions for cable operation, common tariff rates, accounting rules, pricing units, or the maximum length of a word. The convention came into effect on 1 January 1866; two years later, a permanent International Bureau in Bern completed the creation of an international telegraph regime. The world's first formal international organisation, still in existence today, provided a blueprint that many others followed.[20]

The ITU is a significant case for two main reasons: first, it was the first-ever formal international organisation, and thus marked a formative stage in the institutionalisation of global governance practices. Second, the technical management of international telegraphy was a striking pathway in parallel to the proliferating capitalist and imperial competition for its control. The 1860s international telegraph regime thus seemed to endow telegraph cooperation with substantial autonomy and independence from political interference, effectively reinforcing the hierarchies this arrangement denied – a surface appearance that rested on the 'universal but not global' scaffolding of a world structured by empire and capitalism.[21]

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[20] B. Reinalda, *The Routledge History of International Organisations: From 1815 to the Present Day* (Routledge, 2009), 85–89.

[21] W. Vrasti, 'Universal but Not Truly "Global": Governmentality, Economic Liberalism, and the International' (2013) 39 *Review of International Studies* 49–69.

The 1865 Commission

Against the historical background sketched out in the previous section, let me now zoom in on the practitioners involved in the micro-political thick of telegraph cooperation. My analysis proceeds in two steps, asking *how and for whose benefit the international telegraph regime assumed the shape that it did*. In each subsection I highlight the agency of practitioners and their motives, and the resulting legitimation of cable-laying as a political intervention. To do so, I first contextualise the political undercurrents of the diplomatic and technical negotiations prior to 1865: Austro-Prussian competition, French imperial expansion, and the question of who should be invited to Paris were, contrary to functionalist portrayals, controversies with which architects of the ITU had to deal. Second, I present my biographical membership analysis to draw inferences based on individual members' backgrounds, socialisation, and political preferences.

Political Tensions and Micro-political Management

Fundamentally unequal and exploitative dynamics characterised the global telegraph enterprise: cables fuelled a highly profitable globalised market, triggering aggressive competition and cartel formation, exacerbated by the imperial demand for cable communication. One of the first messages on the 1858 transatlantic cable was a cancellation of 'an order for two regiments of troops to be sent from Canada to India', the British government saving £50,000 as a result.[22] Such potential, evidenced by the role of telegraphs in deploying British troops to the 1857 Indian Revolt as well as the laying of French cables to Algiers in 1861, whetted the appetite of investors and entrepreneurs. Innovations such as curb transmission, duplex telegraphy, and the siphon recorder invigorated the industry further.

Though telegraphs never became the 'Victorian internet' they are sometimes caricatured as,[23] prices dropped significantly. The 1870s

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[22] D. R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1981), 158.

[23] Indeed *non*-use of the telegraph reflected the extent to which telegraphy was a primarily commercial and elite means of communication throughout the second half of the century. S. M. Müller, *Wiring the World: The Social and Cultural Creation of Global Telegraph Networks* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 11. For the 'Victorian internet' thesis see, T. Standage,

consequently saw an expansion of international lines from imperial cores to the periphery, with the infamous British All-Red Line as its New Imperial pinnacle. Despite self-portrayals to the contrary, the ITU was not an innocent forum altogether immune against this predatory world of capital and empire. Its creation is therefore best understood as a political intervention.[24] The ITU's format, membership, and structure ultimately were responses to three mid-century developments in particular: intra-European imperial rivalry; extra-European imperial expansion; and financial interests in tariff revenues.

First, the shape of the ITU was in part a response to intra-European imperial rivalry between Prussia and Austria. Rivalry revolved around what was known as the German question, which had emerged in the wake of 1848 as a choice between Greater Germany, unified under Austrian patronage, and Little Germany unified under Prussia. Prussia's ambitions within the German Confederation had been newly growing, and telegraphs gave territorial unification special urgency. Given the kingdom's division into East and West, telegraphic connections between Prussia's main cities required that 'the telegraph wires had per force to cross foreign states'. By the early 1860s the idea that became the ITU was for the most part based on stipulations and agreements already in place under AGTU or WETU provisions.[25] The merger of the two was far from unproblematic, as it required a stance by all parties involved, particularly France, on the German question – even if by proxy of technicalities. The Prussian *Zollverein* was an administrative and legal precedent for the cross-border administration of telegraphs, thus a potential Prussian-leaning choice for the ITU. On the other hand, from the French point of view Austria was an important conduit to Russia and by extension to the Asian colonies. The ITU's regulations, however, circumvented politicisation by firmly staying in the technical terrain of international cables, tariff rates, taxes, rules. Such a rules-based international order, as it were,

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   The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-line Pioneers (Bloomsbury, 1998).

[24] See in particular, G. Balbi, S. Fari, G. Richeri, and S. Calvo, *Network Neutrality: Switzerland's Role in the Genesis of the Telegraph Union, 1855–1875* (Peter Lang, 2014); G. Balbi and A. Fickers (eds.), *History of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Transnational Techno-diplomacy from the Telegraph to the Internet* (De Gruyter, 2020).

[25] See Fari in Balbi et al., *Network Neutrality*.

did not need to take a stance on national-imperial matters so long as it promoted telegraph communication in general.

Second, extra-European imperial expansion contributed to the shape the ITU later assumed. This was the case for the French, Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires. French access to Russian telegraph lines on the way to its new colonies in South East Asia was pivotal for the effective expansion of Napoleon III's newly ambitious empire. Inaugurating nearly one hundred years of French colonial rule in Indochina, Cochinchina (present-day South Vietnam) was placed under French rule in 1864; in 1867, Cambodia would become a French protectorate. In light of this gradual expansion of French imperial rule in Asia, uniform and standardised telegraphy would facilitate communication between Paris and the colonies.[26] To illustrate, the French initially wanted to keep Austria out and did not extend an invitation to Austria for the planned 1865 conference. The Swiss urged the French to reconsider (and ultimately managed to persuade them) inviting Austria, primarily by pointing to the Austrian telegraph network as a doorway to the East. Cable access via the Ottoman and Russian Empires to possessions in Asia would have had to cross Austria.

Third, the globalisation of industrial capitalism supports an interpretation of the ITU as a political intervention. Creating the conditions under which the telegraphic market could expand and prosper was a political choice, and so the ITU was an 'expression of a capitalistic compromise between national states [sic] and big business to defend the acquired market position with an implicit cartel and their consequent entry barriers'.[27] Less obviously, the ITU did not merely make the lives of cable companies and rubber manufacturers easier, but also required decisions about tariff revenues in transit countries. For example, the Swiss Federal Council gave its delegates at the 1865 Paris conference clear instructions on its telegraphic national interest: to promote an arrangement whereby 'the highest possible number of international telegraphs crossed Swiss territory and drew in a hefty

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[26] On Napoleon III's foreign affairs activism in the 1860s see Balbi et al., *Network Neutrality*, 87–88.

[27] Fari in Balbi et al., *Network Neutrality*, 188. On gutta-percha see J. Tully, 'A Victorian Ecological Disaster: Imperialism, the Telegraph, and Gutta-Percha' (2009) 20 *Journal of World History* 559–79; H. Godfrey, *Submarine Telegraphy and the Hunt for Gutta Percha: Challenge and Opportunity in a Global Trade* (Brill, 2018).

income from transit tariffs'.[28] Indeed the Federal Council unmistakably stressed that the Paris delegates were to promote 'the most liberal and favourable dispositions for traffic in general' yet never to lose 'sight however of the interests of revenue'.[29] Overall the ITU spurred 'considerable growth in communications between governments and private sectors in Europe and the world at large',[30] as a result 'enabling the spread of telecommunications and, in turn, the international flow of goods and services' and promoting 'the principles of a free market, open trade and comparative advantage'.[31]

International telegraphs thus expanded under conditions of economic and imperial competition on the one hand, and international standard-setting and regulation on the other. These conditions could be presented as separate projects, but in fact they were mutually reinforcing: the gradual sophistication of imperial power through technology was helped by setting international industrial standards. Existing international relations accounts of the ITU emphasise its significance as the first formal international organisation and blueprint for later institutions such as the Universal Postal Union. Craig Murphy aptly characterises these as the fruits of nineteenth-century functionalist efforts to institutionalise technical cooperation in a world of growing transnational interdependence. On his account, the first international organisations both responded to and facilitated industrial change as they helped extend European and imperial markets. By the turn of the twentieth century, the 'trading area that was partly regulated by the Public International Unions extended the continental market to the overseas dependencies of the European empires'. The telegraph regime features here not simply as a response to functional needs, but as creator of particular sites of regulatory action.[32]

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[28] Balbi et al., *Network Neutrality*, 98.
[29] Swiss Federal Council 1865, SFA, E52, 503.
[30] Reinalda, *The Routledge History of International Organisation*, 87.
[31] K. Lee, *Global Telecommunications Regulation: A Political Economy Perspective* (Pinter, 1996), 59.
[32] Murphy, *International Organization and Industrial Change*, 17, 8, 42–43. See also J. Boli and G. M. Thomas, *Constructing World Culture: International Nongovernmental Organizations since 1875* (Stanford University Press, 1999); A. Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (University of California Press, 2004); M. Krajewski, *World Projects: Global Information before World War I* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

This aligns closely with existing interpretations of mid-nineteenth-century international relations. Douglas Howland has argued that the ITU inaugurated a 'novel form of international order' based on an 'administrative internationalism' that offered a 'striking alternative to the international society of great powers, sovereignty, and forms of imperial domination'.[33] Ellen Ravndal in turn has shown that the ITU's distinctive membership criteria reflected international norms in contrast with imperial or diplomatic norms.[34] The ITU was not alone in this: on Joanne Yao's account, for example, the 1856 Danube Commission too had presented itself as a functional-executive body while carrying out a 'deeply political' and 'ideological' project.[35]

Existing work thus suggests, in various ways, that international organisations are political interventions in and of themselves – even, or perhaps especially, where they engage in the supposedly 'low' politics of regulation and standards: 'these activities are often referred to as "technical" or apolitical, they were related to direct government involvement and national interests'.[36] The case of the ITU shows this logic at work. Excavating its micro-politics in this context allows us to make crucial background conditions visible – not least imperial reach and the exploitative harvesting of gutta-percha – that have escaped the self-conception of, and with it the functionalist approach to, modern global governance.

International Commissioners as Parochial Agents

Let me now unpack the micro-politics of actor authorisation at the 1865 Commission of Special Delegates. Table 10.1 presents the full picture with individual backgrounds of each member, compiled from biographical dictionaries, obituaries, and other archival data. What we can glean from this is, of course, limited, but if considered alongside the earlier sketch of political context, it adds an important level of granularity to our analysis.

The ITC was drawn, contrary to its self-portrayal as a cohesive epistemic unit, from a diverse array of aristocrats, military officers, and entrepreneurs. What united them was political favour,

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[33] Howland, 'An Alternative Mode of International Order', 161–62.
[34] Ibid; Ravndal, *Colonies, Semi-sovereigns, and Great Powers*.
[35] Yao, *The Ideal River*, 6–7.
[36] Reinalda, *The Routledge History of International Organisation*s, 91.

Table 10.1 *1865 Special Delegates*

Special Delegate	Delegation	Background
Baron von Weber, Max Maria (1822–1881)	Kingdom of Saxony	Director of Railways of the State of Saxony; railway engineer who trained with Brunel and Stephenson; 1876 author of *Nationality and Railway Politics*.
Brändström, Per (1803–1874)	United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway	Director-General of Swedish Telegraphs; civil servant; 1831 chancellor at the Chamber of Commerce; 1839 support to Swedish minister in Berlin to conclude new postal accord with Prussia; 1846 the same with Russia; 1855 Swedish commissioner at the Paris World's Fair; 1862 head of Swedish Telegraphs.
Brunner von Wattenwyl, Karl Friedrich (1823–1914)	Austrian Empire	Director of Telegraphs; Swiss postmaster and entomologist; known for orthopterology.
Curchod, Louis (1826–1889)	Swiss Confederation	Central Director of Telegraphs; engineer and diplomat; 1849 graduate École Centrale des Arts et Manufactures; 1870–73 Head of Board of Directors of *French Submarine Telegraph Company*.
Damasio, José Vitorino (1807–1875)	Kingdom of Portugal	Colonel of Artillery, Director-General of Telegraphs; previously director of the Lisbon Industrial Institute.
de Hakar	Kingdom of Spain	District Inspector.
Effendi, Krikor Agathon (1823–1868)	Ottoman Empire	First non-Muslim minister of Ottoman government; studied agriculture in France; worked in Belgium, England; trained at Ottoman Translation Bureau; recruited into Ottoman Telegraph Administration for language skills; General Director of Ottoman Telegraphs 1864–68.

Table 10.1 (*cont.*)

Special Delegate	Delegation	Background
Faber, Peter (1810–1877)	Kingdom of Denmark	Director-General of Telegraph Lines; telegraph engineer and songwriter, remembered primarily for Danish folk songs and amateur photography.
Fassiaux	Kingdom of Belgium	Director-General of Railways, Posts and Telegraphs; Railway Union advocate.
Gauß, Joseph (1806–1873)	Kingdom of Hannover	Counsellor; engineer in chief of the Hannover railway administration.
Herbet, Charles F. E.	French Empire	State Councillor, Director of Commerce in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
Jagerschmidt, Charles (1820–1894)	French Empire	Under-Director for Consulates and Commercial Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; diplomat, 1850–55 French *chargé d'affaires* in Tangiers, Morocco; 1852 initiative for Cape Spartel Lighthouse; 1853 Gibraltar Strait Hydrographic Expedition.
Manos	Kingdom of Greece	Head of Section, Ministry of the Interior.
Minotto, Giovanni (1803–1869)	Kingdom of Italy	Head of Department, Ministry of Public Works; engineer widely noted in Italy for developing the Minotto apparatus (telegraph equipment), rise to fame as first director of national telegraph administration in 1860s.
Nielsen	United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway	Director-General of Norwegian Telegraphs.
Poppen	Grand Duchy Baden	Counsellor of the Ministry.
Sanz	Kingdom of Spain	Director of Telegraphs.
Schwerd, Ludwig Emil	Grand Duchy Baden	Inspector of Telegraphs; electrical engineer, patent holder for a lamp (1882) and a telegraph apparatus, later director of *L. E. Schwerd of Carlsruhe*.

Table 10.1 (*cont.*)

Special Delegate	Delegation	Background
Staring	Kingdom of the Netherlands	Counsellor, Department of the Interior; military career, First Lieutenant, as which involved in construction of Maastricht-Liège canal, thereafter appointed referendary to the Thorbecke government, as which later promoted to first director of the first Dutch telegraph administration. Delegate to Austro-Prussian Telegraph Union and all subsequent ITU conferences.
van Dyck	Kingdom of Bavaria	Director of Telegraph Lines.
Vinchent, Julien	Kingdom of Belgium	Engineer in Chief, Director of Telegraphs; published on international telegraph tariffs.
Viscount de Vougy, Henri Michon (1807–1891)	French Empire	Director-General of Telegraph Lines; former Military Officer.
von Chauvin, Franz (1812–1898)	Kingdom of Prussia	Lieutenant-Colonel, Director of Telegraphs; military career, First Lieutenant. Signed 1857 Austro-Prussian Telegraph Union Treaty on behalf of Prussia. Head of Battlefield Telegraphy in 1864 Danish-Prussian and 1866 Austro-Prussian War; head of Prussian military telegraph administration; author of 1884 volume on military uses of telegraphy.
von Guerhard	Russian Empire	Major General, Engineer and Director of Telegraphs.
von Klein, Ludwig (1813–1881)	Kingdom of Württemberg	Director of Telegraphs of the Kingdom of Württemberg; railway engineer.
von Weber	Kingdom of Bavaria	Counsellor of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

not pure epistemic superiority. Each country brought one or several Plenipotentiary Delegates, distinguished diplomats with Ambassador-Extraordinary status, and one or several Special Delegates, usually the heads of each country's telegraph administration. Significantly, both were endowed with diplomatic credential for the time of the conference. As French Minister of Foreign Affairs and patron of the conference Edouard Drouyn de Lhuys pointed out, 'the nature of the questions attached to a telegraphic treaty demand a detailed examination, as well as technical knowledge' such that 'to prepare the solution of these questions the various Governments would surely want to send special delegates'. On that basis he proposed that 'a commission be formed, composed of special delegates, charged with submitting to the Conference a general treaty proposal'.[37] The proposal received unanimous approval.

This arrangement in itself – and here the chapter speaks to previous sections in this volume on the role of experts in international organisations – represented a remarkable elevation of telegraph officials to international expert status, and a significant enlargement of the expert mandate. Paris witnessed 'the coming together of the European "technical elite"'.[38] The Special Delegates, not diplomats, carried out 'the actual work on the final convention and regulations'. Chaired by French Telegraph Director the Viscount de Vougy, this group convened to work out a common framework for tariffs and technical standards. Despite varying numbers of members per delegation, each was given a single vote to pass the convention by a simple majority. Over the course of sixteen sessions between 4 March and 11 April, the Committee drafted a convention which was approved and signed by all twenty participant countries after extensive negotiations lasting until 17 May. The ITU was born.[39] The draft convention emphasised throughout the international – autonomous – interest of shared telegraphic standards. The document thus consistently referred to 'la télégraphie internationale', prefacing the need for an international telegraph regime as follows:

[The Special Delegates,] animated by the desire to secure for all telegraph correspondence, exchanged between their respective States, the advantages

[37] Swiss Federal Archives 1865, no. 109.
[38] Balbi et al., *Network Neutrality*, 101.
[39] ITU, *L'Union Télégraphique Internationale (1865–1915)* (Bureau International de l'Union Télégraphique, 1915).

of a simple and reduced rate, to improve the present conditions of international telegraphy, and to establish a permanent understanding between their States, while retaining their freedom of action for measures which do not concern the whole of the service, have resolved to conclude an Agreement to this effect.[40]

The agreement thus also left leeway to signatories for their own regulations under exceptional circumstances such as warfare. It took over AGTU and WETU articles distinguishing between State, Service, and Private Dispatches, with different limitations and conditions applying to each. Only State and Service Dispatches were permitted, as per Articles 7–9, to be written in code or secret language, 'whether in its totality or in parts'. Whether private correspondence, in other words, could use code or secret language depended on each telegraph administration's own rules.

But who were these newly minted protagonists of international order? The common credential, as can be seen in Table 10.1, was an international portfolio of experiences, from cable-laying to canal-digging. All of them firmly believed in the natural necessity of technical cooperation, but their views differed on the question of how pacifying such cooperation would eventually be. Consider, for example, French Special Delegate Henri Michon Viscount de Vougy (1807–1891), who also presided over the Special Commission and was the person who urged Napoleon III to call for an international telegraphic conference. Vougy had been trained as a military officer of distinction, serving from 1827 to 1848, at one time as aide-de-camp to the Minister of War. He had also served as prefect of the Haute Loire and Nièvre and in 1853 was named head of the Telegraph Service by his cousin Jean Gilbert Victor Fialin, Duc de Persigny; 'nepotism', as one scholar put it, 'undoubtedly played a role in his selection'.[41] From June 1854 he was Director-General of Telegraph Lines of the French Empire.[42] In 1861, Vougy also oversaw the laying of three international cables to England (Dieppe–New Haven), to Algeria (Port Vendres–Alger), and to Corsica

[40] ITU, *Convention télégraphique internationale* (Historical Archives of the International Telecommunication Union, 1865); author's translation.

[41] A. J. Butrica, *From Inspecteur to Ingénieur: Telegraphy and the Genesis of Electrical Engineering in France, 1845-1881* (PhD thesis, Iowa State University, 1986), 43–44.

[42] A. Belloc, *La télégraphie historique: Depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours* (Firmin-Didot, 1894), 199.

(Toulon–Ajaccio) and signed a convention with the Regency of Tunis for the 'exploitation, by French agents, of the Tunisian network and its linkage with the Algerian telegraphic network'.[43]

Under Vougy's direction, the French telegraph network expanded from 22,919 km to 40,992 km; wires from 59,976 km to 116,437 km; submarine cables starting in 1865 grew to 571 km by 1870; telegraphic bureaux from 364 (1860) to 2,003 (1871); domestic dispatches from 568,365 (1860) to 5,042,302 (1870); international dispatches from 151,885 (1860) to 590,794 (1871). Vougy thus possessed a mix of military distinction, political and imperial esteem and influence, and a record in promoting international telegraphy. He was not merely an apolitical bureaucrat, which not least his perception by contemporaries attests to: major newspaper outlets at the time either glorified or demonised him. The *Figaro* wrote that 'for the most part, the developments and improvements of the telegraphic service are due to the intelligence and activity of M. de Vougy'.[44] By contrast, a rather scathing critic writing for the *Gaulois* claimed that 'M. de Vougy understands nothing, but absolutely nothing, of the telegraphy he directs. He would not be capable of maneuvring an apparatus, nor of explaining what purpose exactly it serves. That, at least, is the current opinion within his administration'.[45] Commissioners' credential, in other words, was not just unstable across different delegations but also contested.

Likewise, the Special Delegate of Austria, Karl Friedrich Brunner von Wattenwyl (1823–1914), was Director of Telegraphs in his country at the time – but had earned his reputation primarily as an entomologist. A pioneer in the field of orthopterology and Professor of Physics in Bern, he went on to be remembered as 'one of the two greatest Orthopterists of his day', his work being 'an indispensable necessity in the library of the general Orthopterist'. His obituary noted that he was 'the organizer of the telegraph service of Austria' but made no mention of his contribution to the 1865 Paris Convention.[46] The Prussian delegate in turn, Franz von Chauvin (1812–1898), First Lieutenant and later Major of the Prussian Army, had served as Colonel of the

[43] Cited in Belloc, *Télégraphie historique*, 228.
[44] P. Dauriac, No title, *Figaro* (1863) 915, 4.
[45] F. Sarcey, 'Qu'on le nomme au sénat', *Le Gaulois* (1869) 420, 1.
[46] J. A. G. Rehn, 'Obituary. Carl Brunner von Wattenwyl' (1915) 26 *Entomological News and Proceedings of the Entomological Section of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia* 285–86.

Engineering Corps and Head of Battlefield Telegraphy in the Prussian-Danish War just one year prior to the Paris conference, a service that earned him the Prussian noble title 'von'.[47] In 1866 he served as Head of Battlefield Telegraphy in the Austro-Prussian War, and in 1884 he even published a book titled *Organisation of Electric Telegraphy in Germany for the Purposes of War* in which he described how 'The telegraph network, with its countries-spanning iron meshes and stations, functions like the nervous system of the human body and even surpasses it in terms of speed and diversity'.[48]

It may ultimately seem quite straightforward to get together each country's diplomatic and telegraphic representatives, and this may simply seem an effective way of reaching politically robust, technically well-informed conventions to regulate international telegraph communication. Yet we need to remember that telegraphs were never politically neutral: in the background there were powerful corporations vying for their share in the globalising telegraph markets, the imperial weight of France and Britain, and not least the fact that apart from an Ottoman and a Russian delegation this was a very European conference.

In the closing remarks of Drouyn de Lhuys, this was 'the meeting together of men of the highest rank … who could pool the results of their experience and form a sort of supranational instruction centre'. Drouyn de Lhuys explicitly framed the exercise as one in which hurdles to communication could be overcome – a choice that pushed economic matters of cable production, legal issues surrounding cable routes, and normative questions about the legitimacy of not consulting opposed parties, outside the remit of international cooperation.

Conclusion

After the 1865 Paris conference, the ITU went on to convene on a regular basis in the capitals of its member countries. What characterised its activity during the last three decades of the nineteenth century was a resolute refusal to become a forum where the intense military and economic rivalries surrounding the technology would be on

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[47] B. von Poten, 'Chauvin, Franz von' (1903) 47 *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* 469.

[48] F. von Chauvin, *Organisation der elektrischen Telegraphie in Deutschland für die Zwecke des Krieges* (Berlin, 1884), 20.

display. Instead, the institution managed to refine its standards and regulations, and its delegates managed to reach agreements and make compromises despite the considerable tensions between its member governments. This was tied to the ITU's emerging self-understanding, on the one hand, and shifts in its institutional design, on the other. The ITU's self-understanding that I have examined here later turned into an inalienable global governance standard. The 1875 St Petersburg conference determined that henceforth ITU conventions would be held by Special Delegates only. What resulted was 'a more precise definition of the conference as "meetings of experts"', now explicitly defined as 'intelligent men, ready to be enlightened by discussion and to modify their opinion according to the considerations that they hear being developed'.[49]

The case of the ITC, I have argued, illustrates the consequences of adopting a micro-political approach in the historical study of international organisations. So, to return to the initial question of this chapter: what then is the distinct value that historicisation can bring to the scholarly aims of this volume? The approach followed in this chapter invites us to think, through a micro-political lens, about what international organisations are from the point of view of their making. Empirically I zoomed in on one important moment in the history of modern international organisations: the 1865 commission whose chief purpose it was to determine, at the ITC in Paris, the scope and purpose of the first formal and permanent international organisation, the ITU.

In the introduction to this chapter I defined micro-politics as *interpersonal instances of contestation*, whether performed through speech, disruptive action, repetition, or otherwise. The key assumption of this approach, I argued, is that identifying the characteristics and emphasising the conditional agency of practitioners working for international organisations allows for inferences about the character and scope of such organisations. Sociological and biographical analysis of individual trajectories then provides clues about two central questions: (a) what international organisations are, other than responses to functional need and (b) how international organisations produce authority relations. Let me return to each of these aspects.

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[49] Fari in Balbi et al., *Network Neutrality*, 184; ITU, *Conférence Télégraphique Internationale de St Petersburg* (Bureau International de l'Union Télégraphique, 1875), 295. Author's translation.

Unpacking instances of contestation requires that we know about individual commissioners' backgrounds, experiences, and preferences, as well as the social networks they are a part of. Of course this is limited: as can be seen in the biographical table presented in the previous section, information is incomplete where archival data is not available. This real practical limitation is further complicated by an analytical limitation: from a historical point of view we will never know actors' real preferences or private reasons for joining a particular enterprise or undertaking. Yet if we consider individual backgrounds of ITC members – the 'international' portfolio they share in common, and the technical knowledge they do not – alongside the political tensions to which the ITU had to respond *by design*, then we actually gain important insights about the making of international organisations.

First, we get to say something new about what international organisations are, if not straightforward responses to naturally arising functional needs. Rather than a mechanism to overcome obstacles to international cooperation, by telegraph standardisation say, the ITU in this chapter appears much more as a focal point of contestation about political orders. ITC negotiations granted countries such as Switzerland and Belgium 'middling' status on the important issue of tariff revenue. This has had repercussions for the general position of both countries in the European international order, both at the time and for decades to come. Further, at the ITC negotiations, national standards as such collided and had to be reconciled. Nationhood was perhaps the greatest European political concern at the time, and so the ITU was an expression of a particular understanding of national autonomy and its limits. In sum then, identifying commissioners as individuals with particular loyalties and interests, rather than servants of a predetermined common cooperative goal, puts the resulting international organisation into perspective as a political intervention.

Second, we get to say something new about how international organisations produce authority relations. Specifically in this case, I started from a conception of authority as the inchoate and reiterative process of authorisation: authority is never entirely there as an analytical given but rather requires constant performance and relational production. On this understanding, the ITC as a unit can be understood as a political performance whereby actors are authorised as 'international commissioners' by virtue of *cohering in and representing* something that gets labelled and then institutionalised as an international

organisation. This was, in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, revolutionary – the label of 'internationality' was still in its infancy at the time, and attaching it to institutional entities was a novelty. As we have seen in my discussion in this chapter, this label had powerful effects where it was invoked to signal autonomy from the political currents 'outside' of the world of telegraphs. Authorisation then, in this context, extended from a move of separating telegraph standards from political purpose.

This chapter zoomed in on the micro-politics of the creation of the first formal, modern international organisation: the ITU. In so doing I have on the one hand tried to make the case for a biographical-sociological approach to examining the role of individual commissioners; on the other hand, I have presented a non-functionalist case study of institutional design. If historicisation is a promising avenue for the study of international organisations, it is especially so because it allows us to trace them back to their beginnings. This helps us learn something about their character, shape, and scope from the political context they responded to. In conclusion, the micro-politics of international organisations can be studied with a potent combination of biographical and sociological analysis, allowing us to gain some distance from functionalist overdetermination. Rather than see international organisations through the lens of foregone conclusions – the functions they are to serve – historicisation leaves the 'point' of international organisations open. Instead we can then look for the aims, partial interests, and political preferences that the makers of these institutions bring to the drafting table: when institutional design actually happens, we can then ask, what non-technical, non-functional considerations play a role? Social networks, loyalties, allegiances, and past performances on vaguely connected matters, as discussed in this chapter, all play into the process.