



The Directors (General) of the Universal Postal Union 1874–2024

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As Codding rightly wrote: “To have a true knowledge of the UPU, one must know its international bureau”. However, we do not know that much about the International Bureau and its Directors (General). My contribution here focuses on the entire group of 17 Directors (General). Unfortunately, a prosopography in 500 words is impossible. I also hope to find some UPU experts willing to contribute a short biography (max. 3,600 words) of a specific UPU Director (General) in the *IO BIO* biographical dictionary (of which I am an editor).

If you are interested in my full paper for this conference, or in contributing an entry to *IO BIO*, the open-access *Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations*, please contact: bob.reinalda@ru.nl and visit: www.ru.nl/fm/iobio.

The old assumption that intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) are simply forums where governments are the main players and secretariats have only administrative functions no longer holds. My expectation (the UPU secretariat’s actorness being limited) was not confirmed. Codding was right, but I am still curious to learn more.

I made an inventory of all UPU Directors (1874–2023), starting with Eugène Borel, using all sources available to me. The overview comprises indications of what they did during their time in office. However, we do not know – neither overall nor in more detail – what each of them accomplished as executive head during that period, whether that be successfully or less so.

I had a closer look at the first Director as the UPU pioneer or “frontiersperson”. Comparing Borel and Louis Curchod, who established the International Telegraph Union’s bureau, makes me curious as to how Borel set up the UPU administrative machinery and set the first institutional processes into motion. His active period of 17 years needs more attention. We also do not know much about relations within the group of staff, as the Bureau remained relatively small.

I have paid special attention to the role of the Swiss Government, which was given the supervisory function of the delegated administrative work. This new IGO model had negative institutional side effects (confining appointments to Swiss subjects, restrictions in communications between the Bureau and member country governments) and was replaced in other IGOs by another model (the executive board). How did the UPU Directors deal with the Swiss Government, particularly the first three Directors from 1875 to 1919 (Borel, Höhn, Ruffy) and those during the League of Nations period of 1920–1944 (Decoppet, Garbani-Nerini, Furrer)?

The initiative to make the UPU (not a League member) a specialized United Nations agency came from United Nations Secretary General Trygve Lie. What role did Director Muri (1945–1949) play? How did he relate to the Swiss Government (Switzerland was not a UN member)? The long process of UPU adaptation to the UN and ending Swiss oversight raises questions as to the positions of the Directors (General) from 1945 to 1984: Muri, Hess, Weber, Rahi, Ridge and Sobhi. Egyptian Rahi, elected in 1967, was the first non-Swiss Director (about whom very little can be found).

I encourage UPU experts to write short biographies about the UPU Directors, starting with, for instance: Eugène Borel, Alois Muri and Michel Rahi (or one of the others).