

History of the Universal Postal Union. Part 1



The Universal Postal Union (UPU, French: Union postale universelle), established by the Treaty of Bern of 1874, is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN) that coordinates postal policies among member nations, in addition to the worldwide postal system. The UPU contains four bodies consisting of the Congress, the Council of Administration (CA), the Postal Operations Council (POC) and the International Bureau (IB). It also oversees the Telematics and Express Mail Service (EMS) cooperatives. Each member agrees to the same terms for conducting international postal duties. The UPU's headquarters are located in Bern, Switzerland.

Bilateral treaties

Before the establishment of the UPU, every pair of countries that exchanged mail had to negotiate a postal treaty with each other. In the absence of a treaty providing for direct delivery of letters, mail had to be forwarded through an intermediate country. Postal arrangements were complex and overlapping. In 1853, the United States had a postal treaty with Prussia, but some states in southern Germany were sending their US-bound mail through France instead. Since there was no postal treaty between the United States and France, the mail had to travel on a British or a Belgian ship. US Postmaster-General James Campbell doubted "whether ... the arrangement can be safely continued," but he saw hope in a postal treaty with Bremen that also covered the Austro-German Postal Union.

Negotiations for postal treaties could drag on for years. The United States drafted a postal treaty with France in 1852, but the two countries disagreed on how to divide the inland postage, and a treaty was not signed until 1857. However, the treaty was allowed to expire. Elihu Washburne, the new US Minister to France, arrived in Paris in 1869 to find "the singular spectacle ... of no postal arrangements between two countries connected by so many business and social relations." The United States and France finally exchanged ratifications of a postal treaty in July 1874, just three months before the Universal Postal Union made the treaty unnecessary. An exasperated Washburne complained, "There is no nation in the world more difficult to make treaties with than France."

Faced with such difficulties in exchanging mail with Europe, the United States had already taken the lead in calling for improvements to international mail arrangements. United States Postmaster General Montgomery Blair called for an International Postal Congress in 1863. Meeting in Paris, the delegates laid down some general principles for postal cooperation but failed to come to an agreement.

The German victory in the Franco-Prussian War cleared away the obstacles to a postal union. After defeating Napoleon III in 1870, the North German Confederation and the South German states united to form the German Empire. The German Reichspost established a uniform set of postage rates and regulations for the new country, but the uniformity ended at the German border. Different amounts of postage were required to mail a letter from Berlin to New York, depending on which ship carried the letter across the Atlantic Ocean. To bring order to the system of international mail, German Postmaster-General Heinrich von Stephan called for another International Postal Congress in 1874.

Meeting in Bern, Switzerland, the delegates agreed to all of von Stephan's proposals. The Treaty of Bern was signed on October 9, 1874, establishing what was then known as the **General Postal Union**.



Stephan was born in Stolp (Słupsk), Pomerania, in the Kingdom of Prussia. He began his career as a local postal clerk in the service of the Prussian post in 1849. In 1866 he was put in charge by the Prussian government of federalizing the postal service that had long been privately run by the noble Thurn und Taxis family. In 1870 he was named director of postal services for the North German Confederation. Stephan's career then moved quickly up the ranks, as he was named Postmaster General of the German Empire in 1876, the Undersecretary of State in charge of the post office in 1880, and the Minister of Postal Services for Germany in 1895.

He worked early on to establish a uniform postage rate throughout Germany, to facilitate easier mailing. His general goal of standardization and internationalization is evident in his work to combine the postal service with the telegraph service in Germany, and in his efforts to organize the International Postal Conference in Bern in 1874. Stephan died in 1897 in Berlin, having made a profound impact on the standardization of mail service worldwide.

General Postal Union.

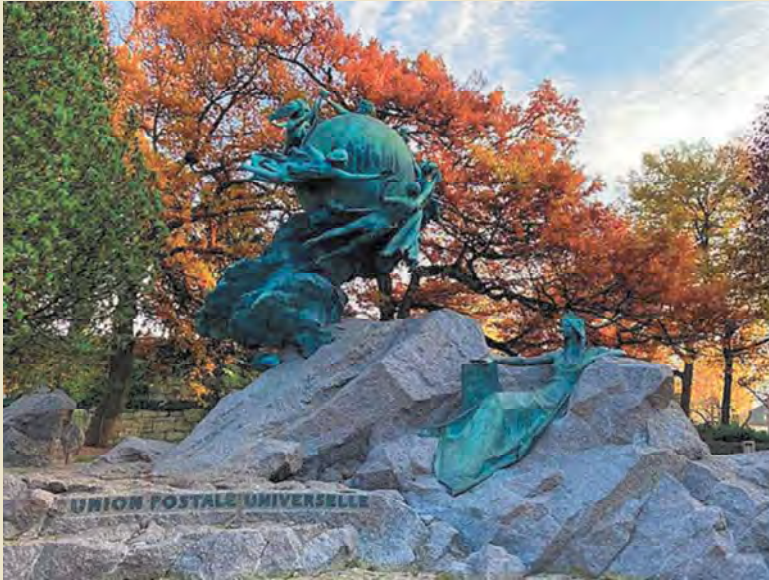
The treaty provided that:

1. There should be a uniform flat rate to mail a letter anywhere in the world
2. Postal authorities should give equal treatment to foreign and domestic mail
3. Each country should retain all money it has collected for international postage.

One important result of the Treaty was that it was no longer necessary to affix postage stamps of countries that a mailpiece passed through in transit. The UPU provides that stamps from member nations are accepted along the entire international route.

The Treaty of Bern had been signed by 21 countries, 19 of which were located in Europe. After the General Postal Union was established, its membership grew rapidly as other countries joined. At the second Postal Union Congress in 1878, it was renamed the Universal Postal Union.

French was the sole official language of the UPU until English was added as a working language in 1994. The majority of the UPU's documents and publications – including its flagship magazine, *Union Postale* – are available in the United Nations' six official languages French, English, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish.



The UPU Monument (Weltpostdenkmal) in Bern, bronze and granite, by René de Saint-Marceaux (1909), the five continents join to transmit messages around the globe, later adopted (1967) as the organization's logo

Source: Universal Postal Union - <https://en.wikipedia.org>