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CURCHOD, Charles Louis

Swiss engineer and first and third Director of the International Telegraph Union (ITU) 1869 and 1873-1889

By **Simone Fari and Gabriele Balbi** · Version 25 September 2017

Was born 7 October 1826 in Crissier, Canton Vaud, Switzerland and died 18 October 1889 in Berne, Canton Berne, Switzerland. He was the son of Jean Jacques Ferdinand Curchod, pastor, and Frédérique Élisabeth Henriette Chavannes. On 8 September 1853 he married Élise Dufournet. They had two daughters.

Biography

Curchod and his sister grew up in a village of a few hundred people, where their father was a reformist Protestant pastor. Curchod was fascinated by the industrial revolution taking place and watched the development of a variety of machine tools with interest. He went to France to study engineering at the École centrale des arts et manufactures in Paris. After graduating in 1849 he worked in railway construction until 1852, when the Swiss Post Office appointed him Chief Inspector of the telegraphic system of Lausanne. At the time wired electric telegraphy using Morse code was developing rapidly on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, with Switzerland being one of the last European countries to install its own telegraphic network in the early 1850s. In 1853 Curchod married Élise Dufournet, the daughter of a professor of theology at the university of Lausanne. In that year he was appointed Assistant Executive Officer of the Telegraph Directorate in Berne, but he returned to Lausanne and served as Deputy Director of Switzerland's Federal Administration of Telegraphs from 1855. In 1857 the Swiss government promoted him to Director of the Federal Administration of Telegraphs, where he replaced Karl Brunner, who had established Switzerland as the centre of

international telegraph relations at the time and had then been appointed head of the Austrian Telegraph Office.

As head of the Swiss Telegraph Office Curchod followed the Europe-wide policy initiated by his predecessor. Starting in 1853, with the signature of bilateral treaties between Switzerland and other countries, Brunner had become a privileged spokesperson for both the Austro-German Telegraph Union (AGTU), founded in 1850, and the Western Europe Telegraph Union (WETU), set up in 1855. As a member of the latter, Switzerland attempted to merge both unions by referring to its neutrality as a country and its bridging role between German and French cultures. In 1858 Curchod invited all WETU members and Austria as a representative of the AGTU to a Telegraph Conference in Berne, where he succeeded in fulfilling Brunner's dream by concluding an international treaty in which both WETU and AGTU member states set forth common rules for international telegraph correspondence. His aim was the merger of both unions into a new institution. In December 1863 the French government announced it would sponsor a Telegraph Conference in Paris with the goal of concluding an international treaty on tariffs with as many European states as possible. However, the Paris Conference organizers decided to exclude Austria. Brunner, as head of the Austrian Telegraph Office, contacted Curchod, who received official backing from the Swiss government to send a letter to the organizers in Paris in which he explained the reasons why France should also send invitations to Austria as well as all other AGTU member states. Curchod furthermore pressured the French government through the Swiss ambassador in Paris and succeeded in convincing the head of the French Telegraph administration to send invitations to Austria as well as Russia and Turkey. In May 1865 diplomatic agents and expert delegates from twenty countries were represented at the Paris Telegraph Conference. Given his level of understanding of modern telegraphic services, Curchod enjoyed great respect among the other expert delegates. He intervened in almost all of the important discussions, reserving the last word before decisions on amendments to proposed texts were made, and he convinced delegates to restrain amendments about urgent telegrams, recorded delivery, telegram length and charges. Finally, Curchod and Brunner drew up a precise table indicating the tariffs for correspondence between different countries. On 17 May the Conference decided to establish the Telegraphic Union, which would regulate the telegraph network across Europe, as far as Europe's borders with Africa and Asia. The Conference resulted in a Convention, signed by the diplomatic representatives, and a Règlement controlling administrative details, signed by the expert delegates.

In 1868 the second plenary Conference of the Telegraphic Union was held in Vienna, the capital of what had become Austria-Hungary in 1867. Curchod successfully promoted two elements that proved to be cornerstones for running the international telegraph service: an anti-dumping tariff regulation and the establishment of a permanent central secretariat. The Conference established an important rule for telegraph operators: that if different routes were on offer, which frequently occurred given the international network's many interconnections, the cheapest route must be selected. This rule offered countries the opportunity to reduce international tariffs, which would be advantageous for all. Since Switzerland had introduced the lowest transit fee, it became compulsory for telegrams to be routed through Switzerland. Over time, however, it became evident that the compulsory cheapest route could damage user interests, because telegrams could be sent via routes that provided no guarantees of timeliness or message accuracy. In order to protect telegraph customers, the Vienna Conference drafted an anti-dumping amendment, wherein members agreed to prohibit lowering tariffs along an existing line. The new rule also established that telegraph tariffs could be reduced at any moment, but only on the basis of mutual agreement between the involved countries and when a line opened on an entirely new route. The new amendment demonstrated Curchod's diplomatic prowess and his capacity to mediate between liberal principles and the specific interests of the member states.

Curchod was also the leading figure in the debate over regulating relations between the Telegraphic Union and its member states and the establishment of a central secretariat. The French delegate

Charles Jagerschmidt recognized that the system of reciprocal communications between countries established at Paris was cumbersome and inefficient. In response, Curchod identified two gaps in the Convention concluded in Paris 'to be examined separately' (*Documents de la Conférence Télégraphique Internationale* [DCTI], Vienna 1868, p. 380). One gap concerned the Convention itself, because there was no way to make changes between Conferences, while the other referred to the regulation and regular functioning of the organization. With regard to the latter, Curchod read from the notes that he had prepared and previously submitted to the Swiss government. He described the idea of a 'telegraphic agency' that would deal with international nomenclature and statistics, which called for a single body and the centralization of programming and managing the relations between member states of the Telegraphic Union and with private telegraph companies. He listed the powers and limits of such a body and argued that its head should be 'under the orders of the directing administration' and should 'function with it to study all questions touching common interests' and attend the Conferences 'in an advisory capacity' (DCTI, Vienna 1868, p. 385). The Belgian delegate Julien Vincent reinforced Curchod's proposal by explaining that a 'permanent seat' was a must since the agent would not be faced with a change of residence every three years, resulting from the move to the capital of the next country hosting the Union's Conference. Although this argument was close to Curchod's heart, he had refrained from raising it, presumably for reasons of political expediency. The delegate of the North German Confederation, George von Chauvin, suggested locating the seat of the agency in a neutral setting. Switzerland seemed to fit the described profile, given its status of perpetual neutrality. With little discussion at all, the Vienna Conference unanimously designated the Swiss Post Office as the administration on which the agency, to be named Bureau international des administrations télégraphiques, informally known as the International Bureau, would depend. The plenary also declared 'its formal wish to see M. Curchod placed at the head of the Bureau' (DCTI, Vienna 1868, p. 454). Curchod first consulted with the Swiss Federal Council and then formally accepted the appointment as Director on 21 July. On 31 December Charles Lendi replaced him as the head of the Swiss Telegraph Office and on 1 January 1869 Curchod started as the first executive head of the International Telegraph Union (ITU). The International Bureau was set up in Berne under the supervision of the Swiss government. Three other permanent employees were provided for at the outset: an Administrative Secretary, responsible for compiling the statistics and editing the *Journal télégraphique*, a technician specialized in telegraph and electric matters and a copyist. When the first Secretary fell ill and had to resign the same year, he was eventually replaced by Henry Marie Albert du Faure de St.-Martial, who would publish the journal during fifteen years and be a close collaborator to the Director until his death in 1885.

In his first year in office Curchod set up a regular correspondence with 37 national telegraph administrations and dealt with many questions concerning the management of the international telegraph network, such as the languages to use in telegrams, the nomenclature of telegraph offices, the construction of new telegraph lines, the creation of statistic tables, a survey on the role of women in telegraph offices and the editing of the *Journal télégraphique*. The *Journals* first issues, published in November and December 1869, were produced in Curchod's home with the help of his household. By the end of that year Curchod resigned as Director of the International Bureau and accepted a job as head of the Société du câble transatlantique français. In his 1869 managerial report he detailed the financial circumstances behind his decision, showing that his salary of 8,000 Swiss francs a year, as determined by the Swiss government, was insufficient. This salary was considerably lower than the 12,000 Swiss francs minimum recommended by the Vienna Conference. The Swiss government decided to not fully replace Curchod. On 9 December 1869 it nominated Charles Lendi as Director ad interim and placed the Bureau's personnel under the authority of the Director of the Swiss Telegraph Office. Activities diminished somewhat and Lendi's travel costs in 1870 remained restricted to meeting with Curchod in Lausanne. Lendi regarded the next conference in 1871 as the moment to decide on a new Director.

The third International Telegraph Conference, originally planned for Florence, was transferred to Rome, which had since become the capital of the new Kingdom of Italy. The Conference opened on 1

December 1871 with 21 countries participating, including the United Kingdom, which had nationalized its telegraphs between 1868 and 1871, as well as representatives from private companies. After a heated discussion in the first session, the delegates decided to admit representatives from private companies to all debates, but without the right to vote. The presence of these representatives made the Rome Conference different from the previous ones. As a result of the new policy, Curchod was admitted to the Rome Conference as delegate of the Société du câble transatlantique français. Switzerland, which had played such an important role in the Paris and Vienna conferences, suddenly found itself without a delegate in Rome, since Lendi was unable to attend the first six sessions as he convalesced after an operation. The Swiss government reappointed Curchod to represent its national interests, starting from the seventh session. As a result, Curchod could play his cards in Rome at two tables: as the representative of a private submarine cable company and as the voice of Switzerland. His cooperation with the likeminded Belgian delegate Vinchent during debates also enhanced his position. The most important issue for Switzerland was ensuring that the Swiss government could continue to nominate the Director and staff of the International Bureau. The German delegation proposed an amendment seemingly intended to remove Swiss influence from the Bureau: the Director would be designated by the Conference and would be solely responsible to the Conference; the Director alone would be responsible for the organization of the Bureau; and governmental oversight (presumably Swiss) would be restricted to controlling the accounts. However, before amendments were presented and discussed, Curchod changed the situation by asking permission to read a memorandum from the Swiss Post administration, a result of Lendi's asking for further instructions on this matter. With this move, Curchod wanted to highlight both the Swiss government's desire to clarify Article 61 of the Convention (about the Bureau's functions) and the effectiveness and skills with which Switzerland had carried out its supervisory task. The memorandum contained a summary of how Curchod's replacement had been organized. Switzerland had placed the Bureau under the direction of the Post Office 'for the time being', appointing Lendi Director ad interim of the International Bureau without having him resign as head of Swiss Telegraph Office (DCTI, Rome 1872, p. 482). It was mentioned that the Bureau was intended to function independently from the Swiss Telegraph administration. This temporary solution had been adopted in order to not 'compromise at all the decisions of the next Conference, which will be able to make on the subject in question without any thought of the past any disposition it deems appropriate' (DCTI, Rome 1872, p. 482). While expressing the unease felt by the Swiss government in a diplomatic way, Curchod also informed the participants that, if the German proposal passed, the Swiss government intended to revisit the decisions about whether and how to keep the Bureau on its territory. To what extent Curchod himself was responsible for the harder line adopted or to what degree he was following instructions is not certain, but his intention during the debate was clear: he wanted to highlight the effectiveness of the Swiss government and win the favour of other governments in order to reduce the relevance of the German proposal. The majority of delegates voted against the German amendment. In this way Switzerland not only outmanoeuvred the attempt to remove the International Bureau from its control, but also managed to acquire further power over the body.

In spite of the apparently symbolic nature of his appointment by the Swiss government, following a suggestion by the Post Office, from 1 June 1872 Lendi carried out his functions competently. After Lendi's death on 12 January 1873 the Post Office entrusted the Bureau's daily running to De St.-Martial, the Administrative Secretary, and provided at once for the official appointment of the new Director. Unlike before, the Swiss government decided to not wait for the opinion of the next Conference, recalling Curchod into the service of the ITU. On 23 February 1873 Curchod resumed the Directorship of the International Bureau. The Bureau's most important tasks were collecting information about new technologies and tariffs, publishing the journal, sending official memorandums to member states, archiving documentation about changes in the norms and offering consultancy for national administrations. The Bureau continued its correspondence with national administrations, often adding its own opinions to the answers, and developed into a small, but stable body that reached a level of bureaucratization in the Weberian sense of efficiency and rationalization.

Together with the Russians, Curchod thoroughly prepared the next Conference in St. Petersburg and succeeded in greatly influencing the final version of the voting procedure norm and the Conference's agenda with the aim of making the union a stable structure in the long run.

For all Conferences between 1865 and 1871 the government of the conference host country drafted the Conference agenda on the basis of general suggestions received from other governments. At the 1865 Paris Conference the first draft of the Convention and Règlement were discussed article-by-article, with respective amendments added by the delegates. At Vienna, however, Curchod had proposed and obtained faster proceedings, as he had only accepted amendments backed by at least two delegations and, in order to streamline the process, a committee had been created to revise the regulation process. Three years later in Rome there were three committees on, respectively, tariffs, regulations and the Convention. A further advancement in the bureaucratization process occurred at the St. Petersburg Conference of June 1875, where both Curchod and De St.-Martial were present. In line with the mandate received at the Rome Conference, the Bureau drew up the draft amendments of the Convention and the Règlement. The formulation of the Convention at the St. Petersburg Conference differed not only in its preparatory stage but also in the Conference meeting, where discussions about the various Articles of the Convention and the Règlement were decidedly shorter than at previous Conferences. Most of the texts were read and approved without heated debate. This was the result of a rigorous procedure undertaken by the Bureau, which had organized a series of preliminary phases that were designed to obtain the delegates' tacit agreement and led to sessions where there was no need for debate or divergence. During the first session Curchod presented the entire process as designed by the Bureau, together with the amendments from the various delegations, and suggested a procedure for approving amendments, which was accepted with only minor changes. Although this was a complex procedure, more power was concentrated in the Bureau's hands. The Bureau had drawn up the entire process, collected the respective amendments, established the procedure for debating the Articles and acquired the power to close the approval procedure in case of ongoing disagreement among delegates. If an Article was not approved during the sessions, the Bureau would formulate a compromise text that would be acceptable to all. In this way Curchod successfully put the procedure for approval of Conference texts, particularly constitutive ones, under Bureau control. As a result the St. Petersburg Conference was the last diplomatic Conference. The following Conferences (London 1879, Paris 1881, Berlin 1885) would mainly modify tariffs and secondary rules (in the Règlement) and leave the St. Petersburg Convention unchanged. The discussions at these Conferences dealt mainly with specific and secondary aspects.

The St. Petersburg Conference also pressed the Swiss government to enlarge the Bureau's budget from 50,000 to 60,000 Swiss francs and to raise the salaries of the Director and the Secretary, whose annual salaries for 1876 were 16,000 and 10,000 francs, respectively. Curchod carried out his regular activities and defended the basic rules inserted in the St. Petersburg Convention and worked to keep the tariff system within the then established criteria. In 1876 he was invited to Berlin by the German and Austrian national administrations in order to participate in a debate on telegraph taxes and international compatibility, for which the Bureau had carried out a study. In 1878 he visited the Paris World's Fair to collect information for the *Journal télégraphique*. In 1879 both De St.-Martial, who focused on tariffs and taxes, and Curchod, who dealt with general topics, participated in the London Conference, which once again was well-prepared. The Bureau also was able to circulate the Conference outcomes soon afterwards, with the changes in the Règlement and tariffs first published in an annex to the journal and as a cheap separate edition, later followed by an official Conference report. One of the practical functions of the Bureau was to collect, arrange and publish information of all kinds related to international telegraphy. Among the huge undertakings in this respect was an inventory of the many different terms in the international telegraphic vocabulary, which was regularly updated, with its seventh edition published in 1887. In 1881 both Curchod and De St.-Martial attended the international electricity exhibition in Paris, where they showed all of ITU's publications at the Swiss section of the exposition. In 1882 Curchod attended a conference on the protection of submarine telegraph cables in Paris and that year the Bureau moved to another building in Berne.

1885 proved to be a challenging year, because Secretary De St.-Martial died in May and Curchod was invited to Berlin, where the Conference was held in August, in order to prepare with the Germans. In July the Swiss government appointed Emile Eschbaeher, former chef de bureau at the French Ministry of Post and Telegraphs, as the new ITU Secretary. Curchod continued his key role inside the Bureau until a long illness and his death in October 1889. While Curchod was ill, Eschbaeher replaced him and on 1 March 1890 Auguste Frey, Director of the Swiss Federal Administration of Telegraphs, succeeded Curchod as ITU Director, but then Frey died on 29 June. Frey was replaced by Eschbaeher and on 1 December 1890 was succeeded by Timotheus Rothen, long-time collaborator to the *Journal télégraphique*.

Based on his life and engagement in the management of the ITU, Curchod is considered to be one of the most prominent figures in international telegraphy during the nineteenth century, both from the perspective of technical expertise and organizational leadership. He had authority and was the individual who most helped to build and manage the international network, including the 'persistent but diplomatic pursuit of his aim of making the Bureau an independent organ' of this early international organization (Perotin 1983: 190). Curchod received many honours from various countries and was promoted to the rank of Officer of the French Legion of Honour, as well as of Grand Officer of the Order of St. Stanislaus of Russia, Commander of the Order of the Royal Crown of Prussia, Commander of the Order of the Royal Crown of Italy and Grand Officer of the Order Francis Joseph in Austria.

Archives

Documents concerning Louis Curchod are kept in the Swiss Federal Archives in Berne (Foulder E-52, nrs 502, 503 and 509) and in the Archives cantonales vaudoises in Chavannes-près-Renens, Switzerland, see www.davel.vd.ch/detail.aspx?ID=27820

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