

United International Bureaux for the Protection of Intellectual Property (BIRPI)

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Author: Daniel Gorman , York University

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Description The first attempts to codify international intellectual property rights occurred amidst the bloom of industrialization and free trade which characterized Europe's economy in the last third of the nineteenth century. The International Exhibition of Inventions in Vienna in 1873 provided the impetus for a new, transnational approach to intellectual property. Eager to exhibit their products, but fearful of competitors stealing their designs, inventors and entrepreneurs attained a temporary "patent" for their wares for the exhibition's duration. Based on this model, Europe's industrialized nations soon agreed to The Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property in 1883.

Three years later, a similar covenant was struck for the cultural world, The Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works. The Berne Convention promised protection for copyrighted material, and thus codified the right of an artist to his or her creations. These two Conventions form the basis of the global intellectual property system still in operation today, assuring that signatory nations respect patents and copyrights filed in other signatory nations. The key tenet of each Convention is that an applicant cannot circumvent Nation A's intellectual property laws by filing in Nation B and then importing the product into Nation A. This assurance, the "national principle," has become the foundation of all later transnational intellectual property agreements, culminating in the Patent Cooperation Treaty (1971), which is a global patent application agreement.

The Paris and Berne Unions joined in 1893, forming the United International Bureaux for the Protection of Intellectual Property (known by its French acronym BIRPI). Working out of Berne, it coordinated cross-border trade in ideas well into the twentieth century. Most developed nations, and many developing nations, became signatories of both conventions, with some notable exceptions (the United States long stayed out of Berne, for instance). Beginning in 1960, BIRPI began to work closely with the United Nations, and through the Stockholm Convention (1967) it became the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). BIRPI shows that globalization, though it has attained much greater scope and scale in recent decades, has its institutional roots in the late nineteenth century.