

We Will Not Be There.

Editorial

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Robert Dawson (Saint Mary's University)

Editor-in-Chief

As I write this, Russian forces are still shelling Ukrainian cities. The ability of other countries to assist Ukraine is limited, the ability of non-governmental organizations still more so. However, the CMS has declared that we will not be participating as an organization in the 2022 ICM, scheduled to be held in St. Petersburg, and does not support individual participation. Compared with the sacrifices of the Ukrainian people, or even the material support being given by our own and other governments, this may seem like a small gesture. And yet many of us are probably thinking “yes, but isn't science – isn't mathematics – meant to be above politics?” It's a natural question: but it's not the right question.

Firstly, while there are two sides to every issue, the two sides of this dispute are not comparable. It's true that superpowers in general take a view of national security that rather resembles one of the higher separation axioms: to be truly secure, the theory goes, a strong country should be surrounded by weaker countries that are aligned with it. This is understandable, but it's wrong, at least when the role is forced onto the weaker country. (“What about the Bay of Pigs, and the American trade embargo with Cuba?” you may ask. Precisely – that was wrong, and this is far, far worse.) Russia's desire for an expendable protective layer does not and must not trump Ukraine's self-determination. And Ukrainians saw in the 1930s that – even when Ukraine and Russia were nominally two equal parts of the USSR – Russia was considered to be the essential part of the union, Ukraine a granary to be ransacked at need. Neither history nor popular opinion is on Russia's side.

Secondly, the ICM is not mathematics. There has been, quite rightly, no suggestion that we should hold our Russian colleagues individually responsible for this outrage. Decent Russians are shocked and mortified by Putin's outrageous actions, and I hope that most of our Russian colleagues are among them. Mathematics is no guarantee of good character, of course, and events will bring the occasional Bieberbach or Kaczynski to the surface: but such people are the exception. I trust that most of our readers who are collaborating with colleagues in Russia will be able to continue to do so with clear consciences, and that many individual friendships will survive this painful period.

But, if we're honest, we have to realize that events such as the ICM and the Olympics are about national pride as well as about mathematics or sport. In good times, these goals, though unrelated, are not incompatible: but these are not good times. We cannot — as an organization or as individuals — pretend that things are normal.

I believe that the Society's decision was the correct one.