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ARTICLE

The League of Nations' Collaboration with an 'International Public', 1919–1939

Emil Eiby Seidenfaden

History Faculty, Oxford Centre for European History, and Linacre College, University of Oxford, George Street, Oxford OX1 2RL, United Kingdom
emil.seidenfaden@history.ox.ac.uk

This article analyses the distinctive characteristics of how the League of Nations sought to publicly legitimise itself from 1919 to 1939. Discussing the work of the Information Section of the League Secretariat, it traces the organisational development of this section throughout the interwar years and argues that a preference of 'collaboration' through liaison with influential members of the public in the League's member states permeated this section's work, and that this strategy was, in the eyes of League officials, necessitated by the tight political constraints the Secretariat was subjected to rather than the result of an inherent 'elitism' of the officials.

The League of Nations has seen a historiographical renaissance within the last two decades with scholarship moving beyond simplistic narratives of 'failure'.[1] In its time, the League was an oft-contested institution. Its proponents could largely be described as liberal internationalists – that is, supporters of the idea, endorsed in moralist language by US President Woodrow Wilson, that a transparent international organisation consisting of liberal democratic nations could prevent a new world war.[2] Internationalists believed that such an organisation would require an expansive publicity programme, not only to secure an 'open diplomacy' but also promote the organisation with information or, to use a frequently used term from the period, 'propaganda'.[3] This article shows how, although League officials held this belief, they hesitated to overtly pursue anything that looked like 'propaganda' and sought instead, through elaborate liaison efforts, to foster a 'division of labour' with private collaborators who would promote the League on its behalf.

That internationalists wanted to promote the League, rather than expect its anticipated glorious results to speak for themselves, may look paradoxical. However, the fear was widespread that once Wilson's moment passed, the organisation would be subjected to the control of the Great Powers behind the Versailles Treaty, primarily France and Britain. In a 1919 letter the American journalist Walter Lippmann, a critic of the treaty and the weakness of the League's mandate, wrote to his countryman Raymond B. Fosdick, who was about to assume office as Deputy Secretary General with some friendly advice:

[1] Patricia Clavin, *Securing the World Economy: The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World – The History of an Idea 1815 to the Present* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

[2] Recently, see Jan Stöckmann, 'The First World War and the Democratic Control of Foreign Policy', *Past & Present,* 249, 1 (2020), 121–66.

[3] 'Propaganda began acquiring derogatory connotations among Western publics after the First World War but could still be used to describe aggressive types of information policy. See Nicholas J. Cull, David Culbert and David Welch, 'Preface', in Cull, Culbert and Welch, eds., *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion – A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present* (Oxford: ABC CLIO, 2003), xvii.

> [. . .] the error which it seems to me affects certain liberals today is their enormous desire to believe that the covenant is greater than the great powers. It would be if there was any popular representation in it, but that has been rigorously excluded. I think if I were in your position, I should make publicity my whole aim.[4]

The resulting activities pursued by the League Secretariat's Information Section suggest that League officials believed the stakes of its work to be high enough to try and secure popular support, but also show how they struggled to work within the political constraints laid on the League system. With a few exceptions, historians have not yet engaged systematically with the officials who conducted the League's public legitimisation strategies. Researchers, such as Timo Holste, Frank Beyersdorf and David Allen, study some projects of the section.[5] Others explore the League's relation to its public audiences through the nascent transnational civil society which aimed its activism at Geneva, such as Daniel Laqua, Anne-Isabelle Richard and Thomas R. Davies as well as, in the case of 'collaborative activism' of philanthropic foundations, Katharina Rietzler.[6] None apply a detailed perspective on the staff, resources and activities of the Information Section, the insides of the League bureaucracy. The important work of Tomoko Akami on the Information Section in Japan and, to a more limited degree, Geneva, is an exception.[7] However, the present article presents a new interpretation of some of the characteristics observed by Akami, leading to a refocusing and broadening of our understanding of the limits set to its work by its political context.

An examination of the public diplomacy of this international organisation intersects with at least two different historiographies: one of international history and one on the emergence of public diplomacy and the struggle to come to terms with the concept of 'public opinion'. Within recent years, discussions of public opinion as a powerful political construct in the early short twentieth century have re-emerged, echoing the interwar debate led by Lippman and others regarding its fleeting nature.[8] Today, a number of studies shed light on the interactions of national foreign offices of the early twentieth century with the emerging idea of an 'international public opinion'.[9] Others, like Daniel Hucker, have analysed more transnationally the conception by elites of public opinion in the same period.[10] Hucker tackles the question of the impact of public opinion (and, simultaneously, its nature) on

[4] Walter Lippmann to Raymond B. Fosdick, '15 Aug. 1919', in Raymond Fosdick, *Letters on the League of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 12.

[5] Timo Holste, 'Tourists at the League of Nations: Conceptions of Internationalism around the Palais des Nations, 1925–1946', *New Global Studies*, 10, 3 (2016), 307–44; David Allen, 'International Exhibitionism: The League of Nations at the New York World's Fair, 1939–1940', in Jonas Brendebach, Martin Herzer and Heidi Tworek, eds., *International Organizations and the Media in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Exorbitant Expectations,* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 91–116; Frank Beyersdorf, 'Credit or Chaos? The Austrian Stabilisation Programme of 1923 and the League of Nations', in Daniel Laqua, ed., *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements Between the World Wars* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 134–57.

[6] Anne-Isabelle Richard, 'Competition and Complementarity: Civil Society Networks and the Question of Decentralizing the League of Nations', *Journal of Global History*, 7, 2 (2012), 233–56, 236; Thomas R. Davies, 'A Great Experiment of the League of Nations Era, International Nongovernmental Organizations, Global Governance, and Democracy Beyond the State', *Global Governance*, 18, (2012), 405–23; Katharina Rietzler, 'From Peace Advocacy to International Relations Research: The Transformation of Transatlantic Philantropic Networks, 1900–1930', in Davide Rodogno, Berhard Struck and Jakob Vogel, eds., *Shaping the Transnational Sphere: Experts, Networks and Issues from the 1840s to the 1930s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 173–95.

[7] Tomoko Akami, 'The Limits of Peace Propaganda: The Information Section of the League of Nations and its Tokyo Office', in Jonas Brendebach, Martin Herzer and Heidi Tworek, eds., *Exorbitant* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 70–90.

[8] Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

[9] Tomoko Akami, 'The Emergence of International Public Opinion and the Origins of Public Diplomacy in Japan in the Interwar Period', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy,* 3 (2008), 99–128; Philip J. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain – British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[10] Stephen Wertheim, 'Reading the International Mind: International Public Opinion in Early Twentieth Century Anglo-American Thought', in Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot, eds., *The Decisionist Imagination – Sovereignty, Social Science and Democracy in the 20th Century* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 27–63.

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the sphere of the foreign policy. He crucially points out that 'the only public that mattered' was always that which was imagined and observed by elites.[11] Building on Susan Petersen's statement that the League 'fed off and promoted public mobilization', Jonas Brendebach, Martin Herzer and Heidi Tworek suggest that, since the League, international organisations have harboured 'exorbitant expectations' regarding the prospect of mobilising audiences and overestimated the value of publicity.[12]

The present article offers a new perspective on this wider set of issues: rather than investigating the impact of public opinion on international governance, it focuses on the attempts from inside an international bureaucracy to engage with it. There can be little doubt that the League took public support seriously, since a large proportion of Secretariat salaries was spent on securing it. Also, the League needed the rhetorical figure of public opinion to underpin its moral legitimacy, and therefore the question of whether it held 'exorbitant expectations' may not be the most important one.

The article discusses the Information Section from its birth as a part of the Secretariat in 1919 to the cessation of its activities at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. It examines conceptions of 'the public' by the decision makers of the section, and in that regard accords special attention to the so-called liaison activities of the section, a category of activities which, it is argued, transcended almost everything the section did, and which illuminates how officials imagined the role of the public in the organisation's mission.

This understanding of the public by the League's Information Section was articulated in memos, reports and publications, sometimes in response to decisions or discussions coming from the political organs of the League, the Council or the Assembly. This negotiation of how the public should be reached is something the researcher infers from the actions and prioritisations of its officials. It considers what they *did* to keep public opinion committed to the League and thus how they constructed this public. The approach is inspired by Jan Werner-Müller's emphasis on the 'phenomenon of "bureaucrats with visions"' and his call on historians to examine processes of 'what we might call mass justification'.[13] The struggle by officials to keep the League connected to public opinion arguably constitutes a key to understanding how the League sought to concretise Wilson's ambition of reforming multilateral diplomacy.

Thus, we know that the idea of international public opinion as a rising force of the age was embraced by the big foreign offices at the time. The uniqueness of the League case, as Akami points out, was that foreign offices worked to nurture public support for national foreign policies, while the League sought to muster support for the League's internationalist project, a fact which carries the implication that the League had both a unique chance and a unique challenge.[14] Imagining an international audience meant that it had to deliver a message that satisfied all of this audience and, importantly, passed the scrutiny of disagreeing national governments. The article argues that for specific historical reasons connected to this challenge, the public targeted and imagined by the strategists of the Information Section came to consist of educated, internationalist friends of the organisation. Officials of the section, predominantly journalists, established a network of other journalists, believing that political reporters in particular were powerful allies of the League. Gradually, they expanded this network. Membership of it was not limited, as Akami largely suggests, to 'experts', but came to encompass a broader pallet of influential individuals in public debate of member states, as well as in cultural life, literature and science. Crucially, this network-based strategy was developed not simply because of an inherent elitism of League bureaucrats, but because of the constraints laid on the Information Section by the political institutions of the League. The Secretary General, anticipating dangerous discussions in the League's Assembly and Council, did not want the section to spend money on propaganda. Scholarship has shown how political pressure on the civil servants came not only from

[11] Daniel Hucker, *Public Opinion and Twentieth Century Diplomacy: A Global Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).
[12] Brendebach, Herzer and Tworek, 'Introduction', in Brendebach, Herzer and Tworek, eds., *Exorbitant*, 8–9.
[13] Jan-Werner Müller, 'European Intellectual History as Contemporary History', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 46, 3 (2011), 574–90, 588.
[14] Akami, 'The Limits', 70.

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delegations in the League's political bodies but also through specially devoted League of Nations offices in the foreign offices of member states.[15] As the article shows, while this pressure existed from the start, threats from grudging states towards the Secretariat were in fact realised in the early 1930s. However, the activities of the section did not qualitatively change because of replacement of its leadership and the cuts in its resources. The section simply scaled down its work since it had already designed it to function 'discreetly' under the radar of member states.

The work behind the article has been constrained by a methodological challenge: in the League Archives, at the UN European headquarters in Geneva, only one box remains of the so-called Section Files of the Information Section. The activities of the section have therefore been traced through a combination of documents 'above' its level, such as minutes of the Directors' Meetings and Secretariat correspondence tagged with the Information Section, and 'below' its level, such as personal papers of leading officials of the section. In this way, a narrative of the section's development is pieced together.

The structure of the article is as follows: in the first section, the initial leadership of the Information Section, the terms of reference drawn up for it, and the philosophy behind its multinational composition are examined. In the second section, the most important elements of the Information Section's 'liaison work' are discussed. In the final section, it is shown that the section's strategic reliance on 'liaison work' came about as a result of the constraints laid on the section by the highest-ranking officials of the Secretariat, who were nervous (and rightly so, it will be seen) about political backlash that might hurt the Secretariat.

Purposes of the Information Section

During the spring of 1919 Eric Drummond, the first Secretary General of the League, was organising the Secretariat and hiring senior staff. He decided that the staff should be 'truly international' and should represent the League rather than their national governments. This did not mean that member states could not pressure Drummond for representation in the Secretariat through appointments, but simply that Drummond maintained formal autonomy in terms of who to hire, and that the organisational structure of the Secretariat would be one divided into 'sections', similar to ministerial departments rather than into national desks.[16] The Information Section was one of the eleven sections he created.[17]

This section gradually came to pursue three overlapping categories of activity: press relations, the dissemination of information material and liaison activities. The first category meant assisting news agencies, newspapers and journalists. This meant running a large press service in Geneva, running a daily news-service, and nurturing relations with residing correspondents. The second category entailed the production of pamphlets, articles, books, photographs and other publications, including some broadcasting and some film production late in its existence. Although an examination of the rhetorical strategies employed in this material is a valuable supplement to studying the section's work processes, there is no space for it in this article.[18]

The third category meant maintaining relations with private associations or individuals and committing them to promote the League on its behalf. In the earliest plans, liaison was described as

[15] Andrew Webster, 'The Transnational Dream: Politicians, Diplomats and Soldiers in the League of Nations' Pursuit of International Disarmament 1920–1938', *Contemporary European History*, 14, 4 (2005), 493–518.

[16] Karen Gram-Skjoldager and Haakon A. Ikonomou, 'The Construction of the League of Nations Secretariat – Formative Practices of Legitimacy in International Organizations', *The International History Review*, 41, 2 (2019), 257–79, 261.

[17] Egon Ranshofen-Wertheimer, *The International Secretariat – A Great Experiment in International Administration* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1945), 90.

[18] See Emil E. Seidenfaden, Nikolai Schulz and Helle Strandgaard Jensen, 'Film-splaining the League of Nations', in Karen Gram-Skjoldager and Haakon A. Ikonomou, eds., *The League of Nations – Perspectives from the Present* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2019); Emil E. Seidenfaden, 'Legitimizing International Bureaucracy – Press and Information Work from the League of Nations to the UN', in Karen Gram-Sjoldager, Haakon A. Ikonomou and Torsten Khalert, eds., *Organizing the 20th Century World – International Organizations and the Emergence of an International Public Administration, 1920–1960* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 129–44.

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encapsulating 'all kinds of propaganda for the work of the League', and was thus defined as an activity which transcended the other activities, meaning in terms of press relations that journalists should be encouraged to push the League's agendas and that the public information material produced by the section should be disseminated through pro-League associations to its members and to the public.[19] The Information Section was thus both a press department and what would today be called a communication department. It acted as the press service to the Council and the Assembly *and* as an information department of the Secretariat, or, as its first official terms of reference stated, was charged with 'the Publicity work of the League of Nations'.[20]

Drummond's Deputy, Fosdick (who resigned when Congress rejected US membership of the League), initially suggested changing its name from the 'Publicity Section' to the 'Public Information Section', shortly after simplified to the Information Section. Fosdick felt that 'publicity' bore connotations of propaganda, a word which might 'arouse suspicion'.[21] This signalled an early unease in the Secretariat about the risk that the League might be accused of spending money on propaganda and triggers a comment on the use of that elusive concept: today, propaganda is broadly defined as 'dissemination of information – facts, arguments, rumors, half-truths, or lies – to influence public opinion'.[22] During the interwar period the word, formally describing advertising or promotion, was already becoming discredited as a peacetime activity. Use of the word by League officials thus not only reflected a negotiation of their own authority but also a gradual return to peace conditions and an emerging conviction that promotion would become increasingly important as mass society expanded.[23] In the Secretariat, the words 'propaganda' and 'information' were used invariably about similar activities. When the word 'propaganda' is used here it simply echoes discussions among officials and does not connote a value judgement of their activities.

Thus, distinguishing between 'neutral information' and 'propaganda' activities is difficult in the case of the Information Section. Furthermore, the material published by the section only constituted a share (never more than 30 per cent) of all material published by the Secretariat. An abundance of records, treaties, minutes and budgets, aimed for the Assembly, for journalists and for scholars was published through other offices as part of the League's pledge to secure an open diplomacy.[24] Contrasted with these strictly 'neutral' efforts of other departments, the Information Section could understand most of its own work as potential propaganda.

In July 1919, Drummond appointed the Frenchman Pierre Comert as the section's director.[25] Comert, a skilled and enthusiastic former political journalist, established the principle that officials of his section should be hired based specifically on their nationalities, aiming for as wide a representation of big, European countries as possible. This representation was not to be (primarily) one of governments, but one of *publics* through the maintenance of liaison. Whether this liaison aimed at what would today be called 'the broad public' or towards a narrower sphere of governmental circles and influential individuals was always ambiguous in the Information Section. Comert seemed convinced of the necessity of both, but the section, through its priorities, can arguably be seen to have maintained an exclusive identification of the public. There was an evident contrast between rhetoric and practice. On the one hand, some League officials, particularly during the League's early days, identified public opinion with the image of the 'man in the street',[26] and Comert himself mused to his colleagues of a

[19] 'Memo: Comert to Drummond', 8 Dec. 1919, League of Nations Archives (LONA, hereafter), 2396, R1332, 8.
[20] Memo: Unsigned, 'Memorandum of Publicity by the Information Section,' 21 July 1919, LONA, 419, R1332, 1; Eric Drummond, 'The Secretariat of the League of Nations', *Public Administration*, 9, 2 (1931), 228–35, 231.
[21] Note: Fosdick to Drummond, 14 July 1919, LONA, 305, R1332, 1.
[22] Bruce Lannes-Smith, 'Propaganda', *Encyclopedia Britannica,* https://www.britannica.com/topic/propaganda, 2021 (accessed 18 Jan. 2021).
[23] Linda Risso, *Propaganda and Intelligence in the Cold War. The NATO Information Service* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 8.
[24] Emil E. Seidenfaden, 'Message from Geneva: The Public Legitimization Strategies of the League of Nations 1919–1946', PhD Thesis, Aarhus University, 2019, 95–96.
[25] Letter: Jean Monnet to Comert, 7 July 1919, LONA, S745.
[26] Arthur Sweetser, *The League of Nations at Work* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), 187.

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future in which 'public opinion, like a whimsical queen, will be the supreme mistress, and when nobody will be able to do anything without her support'.[27] On the other hand, in practice, the section referred to elites when speaking of, and to, the public.[28] Arguably, this strategy was deliberate – because alliance building with national and transnational elites allowed for spreading the League's message without arousing hostile attention among member states.

Some comments on the use of the word 'elites' are appropriate here: The concept is used to embrace the section's target group: educators, journalists, people of knowledge or influence within politics and cultural debates in their home countries and preferably sympathetic to the League by means of membership of a pro-League organisation. It would thus be wrong to say that its legitimisation strategies were not 'elitist', since largely members of 'cultural' as well as 'political' elites were targeted. However, not all targets fit into these categories; some were simply people of some education and a middle-class background with membership of pro-League associations.[29] Therefore, an important addendum to the argument of this article is that it imagined its work as a 'collaboration' with an exclusive public rather than persuasion of the public.

Because Comert wanted to reach as wide a public as possible, the section grew constantly throughout his time as director. As early as 1920, leading officials in the Information Section (so called 'Members of Section') came from more than ten different countries. In 1925, this number increased to twelve, and in 1932 seventeen different nationalities.[30] Its salary budget at this point took up 19.3 per cent – nearly a fifth – of that of the entire Secretariat with its eleven sections.[31] Early on, Comert established a system of external branch offices in places deemed important points of contact with Geneva. These were the capitals of the member states of the Council, namely London, Paris, Rome, Tokyo and, after Germany's entrance in 1926, Berlin. Later, an office was established for South America and in the early 1930s in India and China.[32] Their existence signalled to some extent a global vision of the League, yet various officials of the Information Section later described the system as 'modest' and 'reluctantly initiated'.[33] Generally it might be said that ambitions of a genuinely global information policy would not come to fruition in the League's time, and the section's construction of the international public accordingly tilted towards a Eurocentric one.

While Comert thought that the League needed a powerful connection to public opinion, he would at times rhetorically fuse French interests with those of 'public opinion'. For example, at one of the first meetings of the directors of the Secretariat, the officials were discussing the admission of Germany into the League when Comert remarked that '[From] the point of his Section, he was bound to say his work would be made very difficult if her admission was allowed too soon'.[34] Comert was conveying the attitude of the French government, a government whose close confidence he is known to have enjoyed.[35] This underscored a certain flexibility in the concept of the public.

The Collaborating Public

In early 1919, the section's American official Arthur Sweetser stated: 'As the League will be the centre of world government so it must be the centre of world political information'.[36] Sweetser imagined

[27] 'Article by M. Comert', attached to note by Drummond, 29 Mar. 1921, LONA, Minutes of the Directors meetings MDM hereafter.

[28] Sweetser, *The League of Nations at Work*, 187.

[29] John Higley, 'Elites', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/elite-sociology (01 Feb. 2021).

[30] Raw data of the complete staff of the League Secretariat generously provided by the LONSEA project, Heidelberg University: *LONSEA – League of Nations Search Engine, a Database Developed by the Projects A3 and A13, Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context", Heidelberg University, 2010–2016, since 2017 continued by the Institute for European Global Studies, University of Basel (Project Leader: Prof. Dr. Madeleine Herren).* LONSEA, hereafter.

[31] Seidenfaden, 'Message', 41.

[32] Memo: Sub-Committee of Technical Advisory Committee on Information, 'Observations on Branch-Offices', 28 Jan. 1946, Arthur Sweetser Papers, Library of Congress, (A.S.P, L.O.C, hereafter), Box 69, 2.

[33] Letter: Sweetser to Pelt, 2 Dec. 1943, A.S.P, L.O.C, Box 34, 3; Ranshofen-Wertheimer, 189.

[34] MDM, 13 Aug. 1919, LONA. 3.

[35] James Barros, *Office without Power* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 394.

[36] Memo: Arthur Sweetser, 'League of Nations Publicity', 27 May 1919, LONA, 272, R1332, 4.

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mobilising an international public to promote the League on a global scale and, importantly, furnish Sweetser and his colleagues with information that they would exploit in their work. Public relations went both ways.

In the following, what the Information Section termed liaison activities is discussed. It included cooperation with a great variety of organisations. Most important were the so-called League of Nations associations, established in the League's larger member states, and with their umbrella organisation the International Federation for League of Nations Societies (IFLNS). In addition came an abundance of interest groups, such as women's organisations and veterans' groups, as well as student organisations.[37] In 1936, Bertram Pickard, an internationalist observer of the League, acknowledged the:

> [. . .] various forms of liaison established by the Secretariat [. . .] best of all is the generous co-operation given by many individual members of the Secretariat *who are alive to the advantage of an offensive-defensive alliance between the International Civil Service, debarred from open advocacy of policy,* and the unofficial organisations, often insufficiently informed of facts without which policy cannot be accurately devised and pursued.[38]

In 1934, an internal committee, in which the section was represented, wrote that:

> The work of the Information Section . . ., including its relations with various national and international organisations, has been based on the assumption that public opinion is in a large degree informed through these organisations.[39]

The same committee estimated that, up until 1934, the Secretariat had been in contact with about two hundred international organisations of which the Information Section was responsible for the vast majority.[40]

We now look at some examples of liaison performed by the Information Section in more detail. Each official became tasked with maintaining several liaisons in his or her home country.[41] The section additionally liaised with national pro-League associations such as the British League of Nations Union, whose work has been studied by Helen McCarthy, and with the international umbrella organisation of these national associations.[42] Finally, it liaised with other organisations whose aims it deemed to be aligned with its own and with philanthropic foundations.

In late 1919, Comert reported to his colleagues that a union of national League of Nations associations had been founded. This was what would become the IFLNS, an organisation that Thomas Davies has described as 'the leading non-governmental organisation for the promotion of peace between the world wars' and argued that beyond acting as 'just' a pressure group the organisation aimed at 'changing the way people thought about international politics' to the extent that some observers described it

[37] Daniel Laqua, 'Activism in the "Students League of Nations": International Students Politics and the Confédération Internationale des Étudiants, 1919–1939', *English Historical Review*, CXXXII, 556 (2017), 605–37; Francisca de Haan, 'Writing Inter/Transnational History: The Case of Women's Movements and Feminisms', in Barbara Haider-Wilson, William D. Godsey and Wolfgang Mueller, eds., *International History in Theory and Practice* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2017), 501–36; Glenda Sluga, 'Women, Feminisms and Twentieth Century Internationalisms', in P. Clavin and G. Sluga, eds., *Internationalisms – A Twentieth Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[38] Bertram Pickard, 'The Greater League of Nations – A Brief Survey of the Nature and Development of Unofficial International Organizations', *Contemporary Review*, 850, 150 (1936), 460–65, 465. My italics.

[39] Report: Committee to Examine the Organisation of the Information Section, Annex to 'Commission de Controle – Réorganization de la Section d'Information. Note du Secrétaire general', 21 Sep. 1933 (Adrianus Pelt Papers), LONA, P191, 3; Davies, 'A Great Experiment', 408.

[40] Memo: Information Section, 'Liaison with International Organisations', 21 Sep. 1933, LONA, P191, 3.

[41] Report: 'Report of the Information Section to the 8th Assembly, 1927', Sep. 1926, 1927, LONA, 62097, R1354, 15–18.

[42] Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations – Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, c. 1918–1948* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

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as a 'third chamber' of the League.[43] In 1921, it had member associations from twenty-four countries, with the Frenchman Théodore Ruyssen as its secretary general.[44] On 11 November 1921, Comert briefed his colleagues that the moment had come to 'strengthen our ties with the National Associations' by 'centralising all these efforts in a single office'.[45] He appointed an exiled Lithuanian princess, Gabriele Radziwill, to this post. Radziwill had been hired a year earlier. She worked in the Secretariat for the entire interwar period and was allowed to rise to the rank of Member of Section, a title usually reserved for men, even in the case of women who performed the same tasks.[46] Radziwill was charged with this work until 1931, when she left the section and Spaniard José Plà took over.[47]

Relations to the IFLNS involved the section circulating the agenda of IFLNS meetings in the Secretariat, so that an official, typically Radziwill, who would later attend the meeting, could 'prevent, if possible, tendencies too radical or extremist'.[48] In addition, the section estimated that it got a real sense of public opinion in the member states through this relation – a conviction that sustains the impression of an elite-oriented conception of the public and certainly biased it towards people who already supported the League. Using League supporters as informants on public opinion was considered a 'safe' way of nurturing the League's 'base'. At each meeting, Radziwill observed the quality of the national delegations noted and to what extent they made realistic proposals. In 1926, for example, she attended the IFLNS's plenary meeting in Wales and reported that 'the delegates did seem to have . . . a better sense of proportion than usual'. On the discussions of the 'Propaganda and Education Committee', she reported approvingly that a Franco-German teachers' organisation had managed to boycott a large number of schoolbooks that were deemed too nationalist in their presentation of history.[49]

Representatives of the IFLNS were welcomed in Geneva starting from 1921. Theodore Ruyssen recounted in 1924 that on this occasion an 'informal arrangement' was concluded between the federation and the Information Section which in turn ensured 'mutual good understanding' over the following years.[50] However, Ruyssen later deplored the limitations to this arrangement: during 1923, the IFLNS had attempted to get the League Council and Assembly to communicate the resolutions of the federation to member governments. This was refused twice by the council, whose compromise solution suggested that the Secretary General should keep a list of such communications for each council delegation to disseminate if they wished.[51] Here, we see the reluctance of the League to publicly support propaganda from civil society – a reluctance that the section tried to anticipate by controlling the exploits of said civil society.

It is evident that officials of the Information Section attempted to spend time with their collaborators, push them in desirable directions and report on their activities to the Secretariat. The IFLNS, in turn, eventually forged a special connection to the Secretariat. Between the mid-1920s and 1932 the Information Section experienced its 'Golden Age' during which it continued to set up channels of liaison with the public. Three such main areas of activity can be mentioned: one was the League's sponsoring of three international conferences of press experts as examined by Heidi Tworek and,

[43] Davies, 'Internationalism in a Divided World: The Experience of the International Federation of League of Nations Societies', *Peace and Change*, 37, 2 (2012), 227–52, 227.

[44] Davies, 'Internationalism', 229.

[45] Circular: Secretariat, Special Circular 88, 11 Nov. 1921, LONA, 3. Translated from French.

[46] LONSEA; Letter: Radziwill to Drummond, 22 Apr. 1931, LONA, S861.

[47] Minutes of Information Section meeting (MIS, hereafter), 6 Feb. 1934, LONA, P191; MIS, 8 May 1934; MIS, 22 Feb. 1935.

[48] Memo: Pelt, 'Information Section – Liste des associations privée avec lesquelles la Section d'information est en rapport et analyse de chacune de ces liaisons', nd, 1933, LONA, P191, 1–2; Table: Information Section, 'Representation du Secretariat aux divers congress, conferences etc. auquels il a eté invite en 1924', [sic] 8 Sep. 1924, LONA, 38568, R1600, 2.

[49] Report: Radziwill, 'Meeting of the International Federation of League of Nations Societies', 30 July 1926, LONA, 52102, R1336, 3.

[50] Theodore Ruyssen, 'La propagande pour la Société des Nations', in Peter Munch, ed., *Les Origines et l'œuvre de la Société des Nations*, vol. II (Copenhagen: Rask-Ørstedfonden/Nordisk Forlag, 1924), 237–8.

[51] Ruyssen, 'La propagande', 239.

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from the perspective of inside the section, by the author of this article. These ambitious transnational events united journalists, editors, and representatives of governmental press departments to discuss the threat from 'misleading information'.[52] A second channel was what officials sometimes termed 'political liaison', namely the use of high-profile political contacts to further the League's cause and secure confidential information for the Secretariat. Sweetser and Comert both pursued these kinds of activities. Because of the US withdrawal from the League, Sweetser became a kind of jack-of-all-trades: both information official and diplomat, who lobbied US politicians and philanthropic organisations to secure support for various League initiatives.[53] Sweetser was appointed director without section after the dismissal of Comert in 1932 (more on that later), arguably to hold on to his services but dissociate him from the Information Section.[54] The third example of the section's liaison schemes was a system of so-called 'temporary collaborators'. These were at first exclusively journalists but later came to include schoolteachers, academics and public intellectuals, who, starting from 1926, were invited to the Secretariat to learn about the League and were then encouraged to return to their home countries and educate their peers on its work to promote international understanding.[55] The 1926 group consisted of seven men and one woman invited from eight different countries, while the number in 1931 peaked when at least forty-nine people were invited from thirty-six different countries.[56]

In summary, liaison activities came to mean the constant working to spread the League's message through collaborators. The section liaised with pro-League organisations, national and international, and with other interest groups whose aims coincided with the League's. The section nurtured its own network of handpicked members of national elites, believing that they would prove powerful conveyors of the League's cause.

Collaboration: A Problem or a Solution?

The idea of nurturing elites, as we have seen, was evidently a core strategy of the section. However, this strategy emerged in response to tight institutional constraints. To understand these, we will now go back to the section's period of foundation. Comert and Sweetser first planned their section during the spring of 1919, before the coming into force of the Treaty of Versailles. In a working paper, Sweetser proposed a systematised effort of contacting ambassadors to obtain information that could be beneficial to the League. He called what he was planning 'cooperative publicity'.[57] This idea was blocked by the Secretary General, who found it intrusive into governmental spheres of interest. A 'bottom-up' strategy was proposed: the section drafted a questionnaire to be sent to pro-League groups, enquiring, '[what] are the factors in your country likely to prove most favourable to the League of Nations? Names of prominent people – Associations – political parties – religious, University and Labour centres?'[58]

However, this plan was *also* blocked by the Secretary General, who had conferred with his Deputy Secretaries General, French Jean Monnet, and American Raymond B. Fosdick.[59] Drummond finally

[52] Heidi Tworek analyses these conferences as an example of League 'moral disarmament'. Seidenfaden shows how the initiative for the conferences came from the Information Section, which camouflaged it as a proposal from a national delegation. Heidi Tworek, 'Peace through Truth – The Press and Moral Disarmament through the League of Nations', *Medien & Zeit*, 25, 4 (2010), 16–28; Emil E. Seidenfaden, 'From the Gallery to the Floor – the League of Nations and the Combating of "False Information"', in Gram-Skjoldager and Ikonomou, *The League of Nations – Perspectives* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2019), 188–200.

[53] Madeleine Herren and Isabella Löhr, 'Gipfeltreffen im Schatten der Weltpolitik: Arthur Sweetser und die Mediendiplomatie des Völkerbunds', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 62, 5 (2014), 411–24; Madeleine Herren and Isabella Löhr, 'Being International in Times of War: Arthur Sweetser and the Shifting of the League of Nations to the United Nations', *European Review of History*, 25, 3–4 (2018), 535–52; Seidenfaden, 'Message', 87–91.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Plà, note to Comert, 'Temporary Collaborators', 9 Dec. 1926, LONA, 53149, R1347, 2; Seidenfaden, 'Message', 84.

[56] Plà, 'Temporary Collaborators', 9 Dec. 1926; the 1931 number is from LONSEA data.

[57] Sweetser, 'League of Nations publicity', 27 May 1919, LONA, 272, R1332, 3.

[58] Working paper: Information Section, 'Draft. Questions', 14 Aug. 1919, LONA, 743, R1332.

[59] The Monnet nowadays remembered for his role in founding the European Coal and Steel Community.

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responded that: 'if the questionnaire fell into the hands of people opposed to the League . . . great harm might be done, especially in America' and concluded:

> The best method would be for Monsieur Comert and his representatives during the present period of preparation to establish such relations by personal contact with League of Nations organisations in the various countries as they may find possible . . . [60]

Accordingly, Comert ordered that correspondence with 'liaison agents' was initially kept 'unofficial', sending Sweetser information on agents whose collaboration he had secured – among others, the chief of the press section of the British League of Nations Union.[61] It is clear that the section saw liaison as more important than regular press relations in the promotion of the League. In 1921 the section wrote in a report on its work that 'a newspaper is more a means of advertisement than of propaganda'.[62] The section reported that it was therefore planning the establishment of relations with a 'small body of some hundred carefully chosen persons: parliamentarians, journalists, members of the government, civil servants, financiers, professors, technical experts in all the individual branches in which the League of Nations specialises' and, it added, ideally in every member country of the League. The section would commit itself to 'remaining in constant touch with [the network], either by regular visits, or by correspondents, and by continually keeping it informed on the progress of the League'.[63] The section reported to have established such a system five years later in 1926 in a French memorandum, using the word 'élite' where the English 1921 document had mentioned 'a small body'.[64]

The resulting modus operandi rested on an implicit 'division of labour'. By expecting pro-League individuals and associations to be its propagandists, the section believed it avoided the negative attention of the budgetary control organs of the League, who, it feared, were not keen on allowing funds to be spent on more overt kinds of propaganda. This cautiousness also resulted in a certain hesitancy vis à vis the actions of different national League of Nations associations. The section's patience could be short, as in 1920 when British official George Mair fumed to the Secretary General about a film sponsored by the British LNU:

> . . . both this and other much less sensational efforts of the League of Nations Union are doing us much more harm than good, and I beg to suggest that it would be a very good thing if informally . . . something were to be done to restrain the Union from doing so much public propaganda.[65]

It is shown how Akami's point that the League information work showed an 'inherent inability' of the organisation to communicate with mass audiences may be challenged by means of contextualisation.[66] The officials whose task it was to propagate the League towards the masses were nervous that the Secretariat would be embarrassed or possibly cut down if it received enthusiastic public attention.

It would become clear, however, that even an indirect publicity strategy was not safe from the crisis of legitimacy that hit the League in the early 1930s. In 1932 Comert was forced to resign. Germany had been accepted into the League in 1926 with Great Power status, and when Joseph Avenol succeeded Eric Drummond as Secretary General, the Germans refused to allow for two powerful Frenchmen in the Secretariat.[67] The following year proved a dark one in the section's history. Following a report by the powerful Supervisory Commission of the Assembly, which rhetorically asked whether the section

[60] Working paper: Information Section, 'Draft. Questions', 14 Aug. 1919.
[61] Memo: Comert, 'Associations nationales – Bureau de liaison, Plan general', 20 Aug. 1919, ASP-LOC, Box 13, 1.
[62] Report: 'Information Section', 16 Apr. 1921, 1921, LONA, Secretariat de la Société des Nations – Commission d'enquete, *CE/1-27*, 12.
[63] Ibid., 13.
[64] Report: 'Report of the Information Section to the 8th Assembly, 1927', Sep. 1926, LONA, 15–18.
[65] Letter: George H. Mair to Drummond, 27 Jan. 1920, LONA, 2849, R1332.
[66] Akami, 'The Limits', 74, 86.
[67] Salvador de Madariaga, *Morning Without Noon* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1973), 279.

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should publish material 'exclusively for the purpose of propaganda', it was cut down and had its terms of reference changed.[68]

The early 1930s saw the Manchuria crisis, during which founding council-member Japan openly defied the League and furthermore saw the rise of ultranationalism in Germany, which indirectly felled Comert. Given these circumstances, and the fact that the section had produced very little material that openly celebrated the League or its work, it may be argued that the Supervisory Commission was realising political demands for cuts in the Secretariat.[69] Later, Pitman B. Potter, for one, bluntly wrote that:

> The Information Section was smashed by the [member states] in 1933, under pretext of economy . . . and converted into a mere press bureau of half its previous size.[70]

He elaborated:

> The states . . . hold back the Secretariat in its publicity work. This is especially true of the Great Powers . . . who are jealous of this new super-national [sic] organisation. . . . The States feel compelled to permit dissemination of factual information but do not desire promotion or propaganda even for League principles.[71]

After Comert, Sweetser served as acting director for one year before the Dutchman Adrianus Pelt took over the section until 1940. The appointment of a small country national after a Frenchman indicates that the Secretariat was trying to 'neutralise' the section to counter further attacks, particularly seeing as Sweetser was removed from the section at the same time. In 1934, additional reorganisations aimed at weakening the section's mandate to liaise with political elites. It kept its right to liaise with private associations but now had to work through the 'International Bureaux Section'.[72] Its work was left to many fewer officials, its total staff approximately halved between 1931 and 1935. Despite all this, it held on to the task. In 1938 or 1939, an internal memo defiantly declared:

> The Information Section has always been in charge of the liaison with international organizations, as for instance the International Parliamentary Union, the Federation for League of Nations Associations, Rotary International, federations of ex-servicemen and various Women's Associations [sic].[73]

In retrospect, the way the section came to construct its target group as 'collaborators' contributed to the construction of a specific interwar publicity strategy, suited for times of intense political turmoil. The way officials nurtured an elite of 'carefully chosen persons' in League member states and the way they monitored pro-League associations provides an understanding of what the League considered to be its role. It focused on a sympathetic audience, whose support in itself was considered valuable, particularly as its members would disseminate League information pamphlets, articles, periodicals and so on and

[68] Assembly Document: League of Nations, *A.10.1933.X: Technical Concentration of the Activities of the League of Nations and Rationalisation of the Services of the Secretariat and the International Labour Office, Report by the Supervisory Commission to the Assembly July 20th, 1933*, LONA, 8; See also Gram Skjoldager, 'Taming the Bureaucrats: The Supervisory Commission and Political Control of the Secretariat', in Gram Skjoldager and Ikonomou, *The League of Nations – Perspectives,* 40–50.

[69] Seidenfaden argues that the news and information material released by the section in the period stuck to a 'dogma of neutrality' to mimick the tone of a national civil service. Seidenfaden, 'Message', 129.

[70] Pitman B. Potter, 'League Publicity: Cause or Effect of League Failure?', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2, 10 (1938), 399–412, 406.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Standing Instructions: Secretariat Standing Instructions no. 22, 1934, LONA, *Standing Instructions, 1934.*

[73] Memo: Pelt, 'Memorandum on the reduction of staff and the reorganisation of the Information Section', nd, LONA, P191, 6.

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lobby editors and press bureaus to cover the League favourably. Seen this way, liaison permeated most of what the section did and blurred the boundaries between press relations and information work. This point is strengthened if one studies how League information officials who participated in the planning for the United Nations Department of Public Information (UNDPI) felt publicity strategies ought to change in the new organisation. As mentioned, Dutchman Adrianus Pelt was the third and last director of the Information Section (1934–40). In 1945 he was a member of the provisional United Nations' Technical Advisory Committee on Information and thus wielded influence on how the League experience in this field was presented to the planners of the UN.[74] Pelt emphasised that a future information department should be much better funded than its forerunner and that it should value new technology, should refrain from 'propaganda activities' and should be allowed to diversify its communication to different audiences.[75] Most pointedly, in 1943 he had written to his former colleague Arthur Sweetser that he believed a future department should put aside 'any ambition of playing a secondary diplomatic fiddle'.[76]

Conclusion

Up until 1932, the Information Section, a cornerstone of the League Secretariat, devoted a large share of its resources to embedding itself into the transnational landscape of associations sympathetic to the League. It strove to build, expand and control an elite of League proponents, recruited amongst journalists, academics and educators, spearheaded by the section's programme of hosting 'temporary collaborators' in the League headquarters. Although the section would have preferred to promote the League more aggressively, and towards a more diversified audience, these collaborators gradually came to constitute the very public the section existed to mobilise. Tomoko Akami argues that in the story of the Information Section we 'may see a historical origin of the recent populist revolts against international organisations and their advocates' because, she argues, it was not primarily external pressure from nationalism but the League's 'inherent inability to reach the masses' that defeated it.[77] This article has argued that the *anticipation* by League officials that the section might be curtailed by nationalist pressures caused the section to promote the League primarily through liaison activities with national elites, a venue of work which transcended the section's other activities and muddled any distinction between aggressive 'propaganda' and neutral 'information'. Events showed that officials were justified in their worries, when during 1931–2 the section's leadership was toppled and it was reorganised. The section scaled down its activities, and the official who most visibly was working with political lobbyism rather than regular information work, Arthur Sweetser, left it.

Akami stresses the League's reliance on experts. While an expert appeal can certainly be observed in the information material of the League that she analysed, the image is more complex when looking at its variegated liaison activities.[78] Here, it seems that both the officials of the Information Section and their 'collaborators' were, in a broad sense, people of education, who could reach a cultural, political, academic and international public, and who were chosen because they were 'safe', being already friendly to the League. There can be little doubt, however, that the section's last officials considered

[74] Report: Sub-Committee of the Technical Advisory Committee on Information, 'Report to the Secretary-General', 11 Feb. 1946, ASP-LOC, Box 69, 1. Giles Scott-Smith explores the ancestry of the UNDPI in the United Nations Information Office (UNIO), which arose out of the Inter-Allied Information Committee (IAIC). Giles Scott-Smith, 'Competing Internationalisms: The United States, Britain and the Formation of the United Nations Information Organization during World War II', *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*, 6, 1 (2018), Sweetser was a key player in the UNIO.

[75] Seidenfaden, 'Message', 201–2.

[76] Letter: Pelt, 'Outline of an Information Section in a Post-War League of Nations Secretariat', attached to: Pelt to Sweetser, 10 Mar. 1943, ASP-LOC, 5.

[77] Akami, 'The Limits', 86.

[78] Ibid., 74.

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its liaison-focused strategy to have largely failed and to have represented a misguided attempt to fulfil an unofficial diplomatic role. Those officials who took the lead in transferring League experience to the UN successor department, the UNDPI, underscored that the future organisation would have to aim at the whole public.

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