

Conducting diplomacy for the League: the missions of Secretariat officials

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In December 1925, I was sent out on an official mission to India with the object of examining on the spot the prospects of an intensive League propaganda in India with special reference to the teaching of the principles of the League [...] I was also to put myself in touch with the leaders of public opinion in the country, ascertain their attitude towards the League and, if that attitude was hostile, to try and effect a conversion.¹

Indian League official P. Padmanabha Pillai was sent to India with a clear goal. High League officials believed the League had to improve its visibility in India. His mission was one of many conducted by officials of the League of Nations Secretariat in the interwar period. While most of the plans were shaped in Geneva, the first generation of international civil servants had various reasons to travel across the globe to conduct business for the Secretariat. In this article we will see how these missions were used by the League's Information Section to try to improve the image of the League in the member states. Apart from distributing pamphlets and informing journalists in Geneva, the officials created branch offices and travelled around the world to lecture about the League and to maintain relations with influential individuals. In the reports they wrote, available in the League of Nations Archives of the United Nations in Geneva, the officials

captured the state of public opinion on the League and described what they did to improve it.

After discussing the various activities of the Information Section, I will analyze the system of missions and show how the available reports are useful to understand the strategies of the section. Finally, a case study on the missions to India will show how the focus of the section differed for countries across the world. Building on the emerging literature on the activities of the Secretariat officials, I will show how these missions became an integral part of the work of the Information Section to bring the work of the League in the public eye. These missions show how officials of the international organization cultivated ties with national publics and influential actors in these states, thereby navigating tensions between the League and national agendas. While the Secretariat claimed neutrality in its communication, we will see that on these missions officials in the Information Section conducted a form of political liaison on their travels across the globe.

Representing the League abroad

This special issue aims to shed more light on the administrative cultures of international organizations; for the League of Nations this is a timely call. In recent

years, many studies have been published on the ways the League brought a variety of actors together, and historians have uncovered the networks of experts that gathered in Geneva.² In order to understand the longer history of international bureaucracies, scholars have turned towards the League Secretariat to study the first generation of international civil servants. Decisions made during the creation of the Secretariat impacted the workings of international organizations that were created in later decades. Under the first Secretary General, Eric Drummond, staff regulations came into force to make truly international servants, but the history of the bureaucratic body also shows a constant dialogue to find a balance between interests of member states and the autonomy of the Secretariat.³ In the interwar period, the officials established some of the practices for international bureaucrats. The room to maneuver for Secretariat officials differed greatly between sections, but it is clear that they did not always merely carry out policies that had been decided by state representatives.

The bureaucrats coordinated the work of the League in Geneva, but as various sections established a position in their respective fields, much of the work of the officials was also conducted outside the halls of the Secretariat. In the first place, the Great Powers assigned the League a role in particular territories after the First World War, notably the Saar territory and the Free City of Danzig, where the League stationed a High Commissioner. A role was also designated for the Secretariat in the international relief efforts in Austria, as a team of officials oversaw the country's economic recovery.⁴ Over the course of the interwar period, the League sent officials all over the world to represent the Secretariat and to investigate particular topics for the different sections. Some historians have touched upon a few examples of these so-called missions in the past. Jürgen Osterhammel describes how the League began to coordinate programs in China after visits of section directors Arthur Salter of the Economic and Financial Organization, and Robin Haas of the Communications Section.⁵ Officials in the Minorities Section believed it was crucial to pay regular visits to state officials in Central and Eastern Europe, as Steven Dyroff argues.⁶ Iris Borowy shows that officials of the Health Section also travelled all over the world. Apart from opening

a specific League Health Bureau in Singapore, they travelled to South America to cooperate with national health services.⁷ Borowy notes that many of these missions had a political character for the League as well, as the international coordination of efforts in the field of public health was also used to, as the section stated in a report, promote »closer understanding and collaboration between the various Governments of the world.«⁸ It is clear that many of journeys did not have only an investigative nature.

In this article we will further explore the officials' use of these missions to promote the work of the Secretariat across the world. We will see that officials of the League's Information Section believed these missions were crucial in promoting the League's role in creating a peaceful world order. Historians are uncovering the role of section officials in particular projects of this section, such as the interwar attempts to create protocols and rules for journalists.⁹ Historian Emil Seidenfaden shows the potential of putting the section at the center of attention, discussing how the position of the section developed throughout the interwar period, and analyzing the rhetorical strategies that are visible in the Secretariat's publications.¹⁰

These works and the available sources reveal the uncomfortable relationship between the League and public opinion. The creators of the League argued that the support of public opinion was crucial for the League to succeed.¹¹ The Secretariat had, however, no mandate to set up a propaganda machine. As the wartime propaganda was seen as one of the causes of the horrors in the First World War, Information Section officials were supposed to merely distribute factual information to the public. Former League official and chronicler of the Secretariat Egon Ranshofen-Wertheimer argued in 1945 that there had been a »taboo« on propaganda in the League bureaucracy.¹² Recent studies already show that this frame of a neutral Information Section needs to be analyzed critically.¹³ The Secretariat used neutral language in its publications, and a Supervisory Commission of the member states demanded that the section keep its work close to the original mandate, but by following the actions of section officials, a different picture can be seen. Apart from publishing pamphlets, transmitting broadcasts, gathering newspaper excerpts, and accommodating journalists

in Geneva, Information Section officials worked to promote the League in the member states.

As we will see in this article, the League officials focused on increasing the number of influential public supporters for the League. Many of the Information Section's activities had a relatively small target audience; only in later years did the section experiment with more mass-oriented projects, such as feature-length films and the participation in the New York World's Fair.¹⁴ Officials built and maintained relationships with influential individuals such as politicians, academics, businessmen, but most important of all, with members of the press and organizers of the League of Nations societies promoting the League.¹⁵ This approach was supposed to be cost-effective. These elites could influence decision-makers in questions involving the League, but the Information Section officials also believed in a trickle-down effect in which this select group, with direct access to the public, would explain the importance of the League on the Secretariat's behalf.

To understand how the section brought the League's message to the member states, it is therefore crucial to analyze what the section called its 'liaison' activities. By staying in touch with politicians, academics, and journalists, the officials in the Information Section believed they could effectively improve the state of public opinion on the League. As the section phrased it in an internal report in 1926, the liaison activities were conducted »pour assurer plus complètement [le] travail de collaboration entre l'opinion et la Société des Nations«.¹⁶ Officials in the Information Section, as an exception to the rule set for other sections in the Secretariat, took care of the liaison with their home country. Dutch section member Adriaan Pelt explained in 1921 that his nine years of experience in Dutch journalism came in handy in creating the network he needed for his liaison work. He knew key individuals in the Dutch press and »le caractère spécial des gens et des choses« and concluded that this had made his job much easier.¹⁷ He expanded this network and introduced himself to important statesmen and university professors, and hoped they explained the importance of the League to their own audiences.¹⁸

The fact that they were hired for their networks and experience shows it is crucial to take the agency of these officials into account. Especially in the 1920s, a lot of

freedom was given to section members in maintaining the liaison with countries and organizations. As mentioned above, this part of the Information Section's activities was scrutinized by the League's Supervisory Commission in 1933.¹⁹ Later that year, a committee, headed by Secretary General Avenol, noted that many aspects of the League's liaison work had not been properly systemized. Corresponding with a network of elite individuals in the member states, the Information Section officials had been conducting a form of political liaison that was not officially assigned to them.²⁰ Serious budget cuts limited the work of the section in the years that followed, but as we will see in this article, officials kept maintaining a liaison with members of national elites.

While most of the work was conducted in Geneva, this type of work brought the Information Section officials to the member states. In some of the countries that were deemed most important for the League, the work of the Information Section officials was supported by special branch offices.²¹ After the Secretariat moved to Geneva in 1920, it left an office in London and soon afterwards opened one in Paris. Offices followed in the capitals of the League's Council members, Rome, Tokyo and in Berlin after Germany had joined the League. As we will discuss further below, the Information Section also opened an office in India in the early 1930s. The general ambiguity tied to the taboo on propaganda also applied to the system of branch offices. Ranshofen-Wertheimer claimed that high League officials tried to downplay the function of these offices, as they wanted to avoid the impression that these branches were seen as official embassies for the League.²² As an official in the section noted in 1932, the branches were therefore framed as centers of »information and guidance«, to which government officials, journalists, university professors, students, and other organizations could turn.²³ The potential value of these offices for the promotional work of the Information Section was clear.

The added value of the activities of the branches was found in the fact that the local officials could, better than from Geneva, gauge »what is more likely to attract attention and cater for particular national interests and psychology«.²⁴ This becomes visible when we look at the activities of journalist Vernon Bartlett, who stood at the head of the League's branch in London between 1922

and 1932. In cooperation with the news agency Reuters, his former employer, he sent newsworthy material on the League around the country. He wrote his own pieces for some of the larger London newspapers that demanded exclusivity. At the start of his tenure in London, he invested a lot of time in expanding his network of journalists. He hoped to capitalize on the fact that the head of the press section of the British Foreign Office was a former friend, got in touch with leading parliamentarians, and introduced himself at embassies in London.²⁵ From 1928, the head of the office also was a regular broadcaster for the British Broadcasting Corporation.²⁶ In addition to eight Information Section employees, the Economic and Financial Section housed three clerks in this office. Monitoring developments in the financial hub, these employees built a »center of propaganda and information for our Economic Intelligence Service«.²⁷

The location of these branch offices already reveals a clear geographic focus in the work of the Information Section. The section devoted more time and resources to countries that were considered important. Despite being the largest section in the Secretariat, not all nationalities were represented in the Information Section and this affected its focus. A report describing the duties of every section member shows that in the early 1930s, French section official André Ganem corresponded with the Paris Office and the French League of Nations' societies. Additionally, he also had to cover the liaison with Greece, Iran, Romania, Ethiopia, Czechoslovakia and Turkey, without there being an indication that he knew the necessary languages to effectively analyze the press in these countries. The Dutch and Belgian members in the section, on the other hand, only covered Luxembourg and Austria as additional countries, and in the 1930s two American officials took care of the liaison with the United States, which was not even a member state.²⁸ It shows that apart from an elitist approach in the target audience, there also existed a hierarchy in how different member states were approached. The liaison with the large powers and some smaller Western European states was guaranteed throughout the interwar period. For many other countries, the hiring of officials in the Information Section depended on when a position opened. If a country was already represented by nationals in multiple other sections, this could mean

that the liaison in the Information Section was carried out by officials of other nationalities.

The system of missions

The missions of League officials were a tool to stay in touch with the countries further away from Geneva and with those countries that were not represented in the Information Section. In the Secretariat's pamphlet »The League of Nations and the Press«, published in 1927, the section explained the use of missions:

*To promote the co-operation of international public opinion, each member of the Information Section [...] endeavours to maintain personal relations with national public opinion by means of frequent journeys to his own country.*²⁹

European members of the Information Section traveled to their native countries once or twice a year and many officials also travelled to represent the Secretariat at conferences or meetings of other organizations.

Apart from the travels to their home countries, archival records show the officials travelled all over the world. This is, for instance, visible in the track record of Adriaan Pelt, the Dutch section member that entered the Secretariat from its start and was director of the Information Section from 1934. Over the course of the interwar period, he attended the Washington Naval Conference (1921), was attached to the League's reconstruction mission in Austria (1922-1924), traveled on missions to Greece and Hungary (1925), Germany (1927), the Dutch East Indies (1930), and China (1932). In his years as director, he visited India (1936), the Scandinavian countries (1936) and the United States, as commissioner general of the League's pavilion at the New York's World's Fair (1939).³⁰ These missions came on top of his regular visits to the Netherlands. Over the course of the 1920s, guidelines and regulations came in place for the logistical side of the missions of Secretariat officials. Archival records show that section directors and the Secretary General had to sign off on particular plans; the official's daily budget depended on the country that was visited. The general reorganization of the Secretariat in the early 1930s impacted the

regulations concerning missions and the budget was scaled back. Italian Under Secretary General Giacomo Paulucci di Calboli cut missions and urged officials to, where possible, combine their periods of paid leave with official missions for the Secretariat.³¹

Missions outside Europe occurred less often but section members travelled for longer periods of time. Because of their more unusual character, these missions are also better documented in the League archives. These missions were conducted by officials of all sections, often in combination with the period of leave they had accumulated whilst working in Geneva. In lengthy reports, the officials described what business they had conducted for the Secretariat. The reports were distributed amongst the Secretary General and section directors. These higher bureaucrats often added their own views and discussed whether any policy changes had to be implemented. Depending on the primary reason for a mission, many reports can be found scattered around the archives of the League Secretariat. Other more general reports have been collected together.³² By making a general analysis of these reports, with a focus on the aims of the Information Section, we can better understand what section officials and their superiors hoped to achieve with their travels, and how these functionaries looked at the position of the League in the international system.

Going through the reports written in the interwar period, it is clear that a uniform guideline on what to report on was never established. The reports varied greatly in length and the frequency in which missions to particular countries took place was also irregular. The reports touched upon many different topics, but there are recurring elements visible. The first part of the report usually consisted of an overview of the country that was visited. As an introduction to their readers, Secretariat officials often discussed the political and socioeconomic situation in the particular country. In the early 1930s, Secretariat officials, for instance, discussed how they had witnessed the effects of the Great Depression had on the member states of the League.³³

In many reports, this introduction was followed by an analysis of supposed general strains of public opinion and focused specifically on the opinions that existed about the League. To capture the state of public opinion, officials often relied on the conversations they had with

journalists, parliamentarians and the other individuals they met on their visit. The section called this part of the mission, as stated in »The League of Nations and the Press«, »an attentive journalistic study of general national tendencies«.³⁴ Evidence-based information was the exception rather than the rule. For instance, after their mission to Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark in November 1936, Pelt, Konni Zilliacus and Henriette Rieber-Mohn filled pages with generalizations about the different countries and the general currents of public opinion they discerned, without explaining their methods.³⁵ Capturing the state of the League in Sweden in 1936, they argued, for instance:

*The attitude to the League was friendly, but somewhat gloomy. Swedish public opinion is firm about remaining in the League [...] for it believes that the only alternative will sooner or later be another great war in which it would be exceedingly difficult for Sweden to remain neutral.*³⁶

The officials relied on their own position and a confidence in their network to understand the mood of a national public opinion on the League. These descriptions had an impact, as they were read by higher Secretariat officials and often led to discussions between directors on how to proceed.

Apart from the overview on the state of the country that was visited, the officials also described what they had done for the Secretariat on their mission. For members of the Information Section, the missions were seen as an opportunity to improve the public opinion on the League. Officials stated how many lectures they gave and sent back newspaper clippings covering their activities. Historian Mary Kinnear describes how Canadian Mary McGeachy, senior assistant in the Information Section, used her missions to Canada in 1930, 1932, 1936 and 1938 to give countless lectures. With enthusiasm for the League waning over the course of the 1930s, McGeachy increased her focus on the League's social and »technical« work with every mission.³⁷ In the 1930s, officials also often tried to showcase League films and broadcasted speeches on radio.³⁸

Many officials stated, however, that the real value of their mission was found in the opportunity to network with particular individuals. Officials often carefully

listed the journalists, parliamentarians or other functionaries they had met on their trip. Information Section official Hessel Duncan Hall argued on his mission to South Africa, Australia and New Zealand that he had a policy »to speak as little as possible in public and to concentrate on personal conversations and addresses in private to small groups of influential people«. ³⁹ McGeachy stated in a report for her mission to Canada in 1932, that

*while I did address some fifteen or twenty large public meetings, I consider the most important work was done in the many discussions which I was able to have with small executives and with influential individuals.*⁴⁰

Fellow Information Section official Henry Cummings wrote a letter of appreciation of McGeachy's reports and the system of missions in general, as he commented that

*it shows once more how important are personal contacts. Miss McGeachy has been able to do in a few weeks what would have taken years to do less effectively from Geneva*⁴¹

These comments show, once again, that the Information Section believed approaching the elites was the best way to improve the image of the League abroad.

To support this strategy of a trickle-down effect of the League's message, League officials also met with the executives of national League of Nations societies. These societies were composed of civil society actors and promoted the League independently from the Secretariat, but these missions show Secretariat officials tried to sustain their work. Section members reported on the problems and successes of the societies, discussed strategy with their directors, and gave speeches at their meetings. Hessel Duncan Hall met with the chairman of the South African League of Nations Union in 1935 and discussed the strategies the society employed. Duncan Hall made use of his network and position as international civil servant and claimed that he helped the organization by opening doors that had remained closed for the society. He introduced the society's executives to government individuals and journalists

sympathetic to their cause. He argued: »A visitor can thus assist the Union to mobilize more effectively the active support for the League in the country«. ⁴²

As discussed above, these types of missions were not only conducted by officials of the Information Section. Especially in the 1930s, all officials of the Secretariat were encouraged to combine periods of leave with the business of different sections in the country that was visited. This meant that various officials assisted the work of the Information Section. On his travels through South Africa in 1935, Seymour Jacklin, the League's treasurer, showed a film on the League, broadcasted speeches, and met with Jan Smuts and the South African prime minister. ⁴³ In 1937, Information Section director Pelt approved the mission of Finn Friis, member of the Disarmament Section, to Denmark, as Pelt considered it a follow-up on his own mission to Scandinavia in 1936. Friis introduced himself to various Danish journalists and attended meetings of the League of Nations society and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. ⁴⁴ Reports like these show that, despite heavy budget cuts, many of the essential elements of the liaison work were still intact in the late 1930s. The new system ensured that with minimal funds a maximum number of officials fulfilled the tasks in the member states. At the same time, this new procedure was a step backwards for the journalists in the Information Section, as they were originally hired with the skills and network to conduct activities targeting public opinion in a particular country.

On missions to countries that were not often visited by the League, officials acted as ambassadors of the entire Secretariat. After returning from his mission to Persia in 1928, Abol-Hassan Hekimi, official in the Minorities Section, sent letters to the directors of nine different sections to discuss the results of his journey. In many cases, the directors had asked him to investigate a particular topic or bring issues under the intention of the government officials he met. In his report, he stated that he dedicated most of his time to the work of the Information Section. Before departure, Hekimi had discussed with section officials whom he had to approach. He had also brought a few dozen League pamphlets with him and the Information Section had made suggestions concerning which dignitaries to approach with these pamphlets to produce what they

called the ›*maximum effect*‹.⁴⁵ Amongst the recipients were the president of the parliament, various ministers, and journalists. With these individuals he also discussed matters that concerned other sections. Hekimi reported to the Secretariat's director of the Health Section that he had discussed public hygiene with the responsible ministers and high government.⁴⁶ Hekimi's letter to Rachel Crowdy, director of the Social Section, shows there were also downsides to the fact that he represented the entire Secretariat. Different tasks collided with each other when it came to the League's ideas on the control of the opium trade and the role of the Persian state in this program. Hekimi therefore explained that he had not been able to publicly defend the League's policies in this field, as this would have hampered his task of promoting the League as a whole in the country.⁴⁷ On his missions to South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, section official Hessel Duncan Hall often met with prime ministers and other dignitaries and sent reports to the Secretariat members working in the Mandate, Financial, Health, Publication, and Legal Sections.⁴⁸

By combining missions with periods of leave, and by conducting work for different sections at the same time, the system of missions shows that the Secretariat tried to make the most of the budget that was available. Officials travelled across the world to promote the work of the League. At the same time, this arrangement meant that the bureaucrats that were hired to work on a particular topic now had to deal with issues that were out of their area of expertise. The existing regulations also led to a geographic bias, as is visible in the cases discussed above. Most missions took place in the native countries of Secretariat officials. This meant that outside of Europe, relatively many missions were conducted to the British Dominions, mirroring the composition of the Secretariat.

Secretariat officials in India

Zooming in on the various missions that League officials conducted in India, we will better understand what role these journeys had in the strategy of the Information Section, especially for countries outside Europe. India was one of the largest member states of the League, but also an ›anomalous‹ one, as various

scholars have mentioned.⁴⁹ India was the only member in the international organization that was not self-governing, and the British Empire was in charge of Indian foreign policy. The Indian delegation to the League's Assembly was selected by the India Office in London, in consultation with the imperial Government of India, and until 1928 a native Briton always led the delegation.⁵⁰

The work of the League officials can only be properly understood in the context of the fight for self-determination that dominated India in the interwar period. The Indian contribution to the British efforts during the First World War had enlarged Indian aspirations for a form of self-government and the power of the Indian National Congress (INC) grew over the interwar period. With the non-cooperation movement (1920-1922) and the civil disobedience movement in the early 1930s, Mahatma Gandhi pressured the imperial government for reforms.⁵¹ As did many others across the world, Indian nationalists looked with interest at Woodrow Wilson's claim to support self-determination at the end of the First World War. Nationalist actors hoped the League would play a role in the debates in India, but this hope quickly faded. As a racial hierarchy was preserved in the League, imperial interests prevailed in the decisions that were made.⁵² Indian nationalists started to see the organization as synonymous with the imperial system. In 1928, Jawaharlal Nehru called the League a ›new cloak for the greed of imperialist powers‹ after he had witnessed the exclusion of colonies at League meetings in Geneva.⁵³ In this period, moderate political factions in the Indian parliament thought the League could be a useful tool in creating an Indian international narrative, distinct from the British, and criticized the League within the framework of the organization. Politicians discussed the large contribution of India to the League and pushed the Secretariat to hire more Indians. The composition of the Indian delegation was also debated in the Indian parliament throughout the interwar period.⁵⁴

These discussions would resonate in the work of the Information Section in India. As discussed, former journalists of most major member states were hired as officials in the Secretariat, but sources in the League archives show that the liaison with India was conducted by two officials that covered Great Britain and all the

Dominions. Pierre Comert, the director of the section until 1932, argued in 1922 that India was not on the radar of the section:

*[We] had been experiencing great difficulty in our information work in India ever since we tried to get into touch with that country. The distance and our ignorance about the people interested in the League brought all active movement more or less to a standstill.*⁵⁵

The quote shows a sense of self-reflection about the shortcomings of the section, but mostly reveals that India was not high on the section's priority list. A British administrator of the Young Men's Christian Association in Calcutta was, upon his own request, appointed as 'honorary correspondent' for the League in India, but there are no sources to show that he became an important actor for the League in India.⁵⁶

Following pressure in the Indian parliament, the Indian delegation to the League's Assembly pushed for an increase of the activities of the Information Section in India.⁵⁷ As a first course of action, the Secretariat sent P. Padmanabha Pillai, official in the Economic and Financial Section, on an exploratory mission to India in 1926.⁵⁸ Comert and Secretary General Drummond believed that Pillai, as one of the few Indians working in the Secretariat, was best able to analyze the situation of the League in India. The report he submitted to Secretariat directors contained many of the elements that we have seen above. Pillai discussed how he had prepared his mission, who he met in India, and analyzed what politicians and newspapers said about the League.

The aim of this mission, as Pillai put it, was to examine »the prospects of an intensive League propaganda in India with special reference to the teaching of the principles of the League«. ⁵⁹ In his report he did not hide the fact that many Indians did not see the League as the safeguard of the ideal world order. Without specifying who he had talked with, he argued that »in the minds of thinking Indians« the League was seen as a »combination of the white races against the coloured«. ⁶⁰ He identified some of the issues many Indians had with the League, starting with the disappointment in the fact that the League did not mediate in their struggle for more self-rule. He also reported on the doubts about the size of

the Indian share of the budget and the lack of Indians as head of the Assembly delegations.⁶¹

Pillai saw his mission as a chance to improve the knowledge of the League in India. In a broad sense his mission was to get acquainted with »the leaders of public opinion in the country«, poll their opinion on the League »and if that attitude was hostile, to try and effect a conversion«. ⁶² He talked to newspaper editors and reported on various lectures he held throughout India. In the cities he visited, he tried to find strong supporters of the League, in order to create or revive League of Nations societies. Pillai's report led to a debate within the Secretariat. The Secretary General and Information Section officials discussed ideas about changes in the liaison with India and debated the possibility of opening a specific office of the Information Section. Drummond decided, however, that a budget for a special office was not available. Instead, in 1928, the Information Section took on Indian journalist Amulya Chandra Chatterjee, who would deal with the liaison with India.⁶³

The discussions about an Indian office persisted, however. Indian politicians pressured the Indian delegation to the Assembly to table the matter, and the delegation did so in 1930.⁶⁴ The delegation pointed to the fact that the Information Section had opened offices in the capitals of all states with a similar or higher contribution to the Secretariat's budget: Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan and Germany. In a short report, Information Section official Chatterjee strongly agreed with the proposal of the Indian delegation. He argued that it was difficult for him to act as the liaison in Geneva without the support of League officials in India. He discussed the advantages of an office over the original system, with occasional missions:

*As a result of my endeavours to create contacts with India, I have come to the conclusion that it is necessary to establish an office in India, for without such an outpost it is difficult to keep a sustained interest, contacts once made are lost, anti-League opinions thrive unchallenged, national endeavours like League of Nations Associations die for want of incentive, and public opinion in support of the League cannot be nourished.*⁶⁵

The momentum to create an office was stronger at this point. Chatterjee was supported by other officials, such as Arthur Salter, the director of the Economic and Financial Section. Having returned from a tour of Asia, Salter argued that India had been neglected by the League, and that therefore »the League is probably as little known and understood in India as anywhere in the world«.⁶⁶ In 1932, the League opened its office in Bombay. With the officials active in India, the Information Section translated publications in Indian languages and lobbied with Indian newspaper editors to publish on the League. Some historians have touched upon particular activities that were conducted in the office in Bombay.⁶⁷ Throughout the 1930s, however, League officials also kept organizing missions from Geneva to evaluate and support the work of the office.

Until his death in 1935, Amulya Chatterjee communicated frequently with the officials in India. He travelled to India on a regular basis and was supported by other officials; the League archives contain at least ten reports of the missions of Secretariat officials to India in the 1930s. In 1936, section director Adriaan Pelt inspected the office in Bombay, and conducted a long mission through the country. His report, totaling over 120 pages, touched on all aspects of the past and future of the League's presence in India. His journey brought him to ten Indian cities, from Delhi in the north to Colombo in modern-day Sri Lanka. Pelt was invited to dinners of local government officials and organized various events in different cities.⁶⁸ In the two months he traveled through the country he met hundreds of newspaper editors, academics, and government officials, including the viceroy. Improving relations with Indian politicians was high on his list of priorities.

Occasionally, Pelt delivered a lecture in front of larger crowds. The text of this speech demonstrates how League officials strived to create a more positive opinion about the organization in India. In his lecture Pelt directly addressed the question »What does India get out of the League?«⁶⁹ At a time when the League's system of collective security failed during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, Pelt defended the organization by arguing that

The League is not perfect [...], but it does represent the best result humanity has been able to achieve

*up to the present in its strenuous efforts and painful search for a solution of the problem how to organize inter-state relations*⁷⁰

Later in his speech he focused on the side of the League's work that India had directly benefited from. He emphasized the League's efforts in fields that were considered technical and less political and pointed at the work done to improve labor conditions. After discussing the importance of its work on human trafficking, opium control, and the fight against epidemics, he asked his audience: »Does India not want to participate in all this?«⁷¹ He urged Indians to forget about the League's flaws and accept that it would be useful to cooperate in its activities.

With the office in Bombay and the visits of officials, the Information Section worked on the promotion of the League in India. Nevertheless, the relationship with India can only be properly understood in the context of the fight for self-governance by Indian nationalists in the interwar period. League officials monitored Indian politics and the growth of the Indian National Congress on their missions. After a mission in India in the Summer of 1934, Indian Information Section official Sudhindra Nath Ghose emphasized the important role of the INC in India and touched upon its relationship with the League. He described the influence individuals such as Nehru and Gandhi had on the Indian population and argued that the majority of the Indian press had given their support to the INC's fight for self-governance. He insisted on »the tremendous importance of having the sympathy of the Congress leaders [...] in doing propaganda work in India in favour of the League of Nations.«⁷² On his mission two years later, Pelt lobbied with Indian politicians, and met with Nehru in Delhi. They discussed the state of Indian politics and the role the League could play in technical assistance. According to Pelt, Nehru urged the League to investigate Indian agriculture, in order to create a basis for economic and social reforms.⁷³ In their reports, both Pelt and Ghose gave the impression that in the long run it would be possible for the League to cooperate with the INC.

But despite these comments, the office in Bombay and Secretariat officials in Geneva never really engaged with Indian nationalist politicians. Throughout the interwar period, Indian nationalists came to see the

League as a British conspiracy to multiply its vote in the international organization. Despite meeting with Pelt, Nehru, for instance, did not see a future for India in the League. In the late 1920s, Nehru had gotten involved with the League Against Imperialism, and when the system of collective security failed in the 1930s, he argued that »there are few who take [the League] seriously as an instrument for the preservation of peace and that India has no enthusiasm for it whatsoever.«⁷⁴ In almost all reports, League officials wrote with a sense of disdain towards the nationalist movement. Unsurprisingly, League officials involved in the liaison with India had closer ties to the imperial government than to the Indian nationalists. Indian officials in Geneva often came out of the ranks of the imperial government. Upon creation of the office, the Government of India also negotiated influence on the individuals that were hired for the League in Bombay.⁷⁵ Archives show that the imperial government used this veto more than once, as officials wanted to ensure the League would not employ someone who would speak up about national Indian politics. In his account of the Secretariat, section member Egon Ranshofen-Wertheimer argued that Indian candidates for positions in the League »could not [...] be appointed without at least the tacit consent of the India Office in London.«⁷⁶

While Indian nationalists had originally hoped the League would advocate for their cause against Great Britain, the League officials discarded this in their reports as a »misconception« of the role of the League in international relations. Chatterjee dismissed the nationalists' increasing distrust towards the League as a sign of »prejudice« based on the »ignorance« of what the League's true aims were. Using the existing regulations, he argued that without a request of the Government of India, »the League cannot thrust itself on India«.⁷⁷ Ghose equally believed that an important task for the Bombay office was to overcome the »lack of correct information« about the functions of the League's Covenant that existed in the leadership of the INC.⁷⁸

In Pelt's comments on this subject, a distinct colonial mindset is visible. Even though he considered the intelligence of the Indian elite »strikingly high«, it was because of their »lack of political maturity« that nationalist ideas were thriving in India.⁷⁹ In his report, Pelt singled out supposed inconsistencies and

hypocrisies in some of the criticism voiced by Indians he talked to; he believed the Indians did not understand the consequences of their requests. He explained the Indian call for League cooperation in its fight for self-rule as a request for foreign powers to intervene: »with our Western inclination to more positive action, this desire seems strange, but it just goes to show how the Indian mind works when it judges our Institution.«⁸⁰ The belief that the League could intervene in matters considered internal was a »fundamental error of judgment« on behalf of the Indian nationalists. That error was »so deep-rooted in the mind of the Indian public that it will require a very prolonged effort to correct this«.⁸¹ Officials saw hostility towards the League as the result of a lack of communication; they neglected the fact that Indian nationalists believed the League and its role in the system of international relations only hampered India's fight for self-rule.

This understanding of the task for the League in India also translated in the strategy that officials suggested for the Secretariat. As in other countries, the officials believed it was most important to convince elites about the importance of the League. Ghose explained that Indian suffrage was still limited, and that the influence of the INC therefore did not have to be exaggerated.⁸² Coming back from his mission, Pelt stated that »in using the words ›public opinion‹ in India, one is referring only to a small elite who participates in the country's political and cultural life«.⁸³ Targeting the Indian intellectual elite was, according to him, the only way to success. The Information Section saw the members of this elite as representatives of public opinion. Pelt estimated that only 11% of the Indian population was literate, and in unequivocal terms he argued in 1936 that: »From the point of view of the League, the masses simply do not count for the time being.«⁸⁴ Sustained by a racial bias, as discussed above, the director of the Information Section had no trouble in writing off 90% of the Indian population.

Conclusion

On the missions for the Secretariat, League bureaucrats had a chance to gauge whether the plans made in Geneva had any effect in the member states. The reports

in the League archives, read and discussed by higher officials, had an impact, and show that these missions became tools to evaluate particular policies and their results in particular countries. The position the League bureaucrats held on these missions in countries outside Europe can be compared to that of travelling diplomats. They represented the Secretariat in meetings with dignitaries in the countries they visited and dealt with the business that various section directors had put on them. With their liaison activities, officials fostered ties with actors in the member states. It shows that the work of these international bureaucrats had a strong political component. For the Information Section, the missions were an integral part of the strategy to improve the image of the League in the member states. Despite the claim to stay neutral in their communication, League officials lobbied for the international organization. While officials occasionally addressed public gatherings, the main focus was on mobilizing influential individuals. This network of people that were considered opinion leaders, containing journalists and local activists of the League of Nations societies, would advocate for the League on their behalf.

The Information Section focused on elites. Officials believed this strategy fit best with the available funds, but it also shows they had a particular conception of the public they wanted to reach. The targeted elites would be able to influence decision-makers. Additionally, they were supposed to create a trickle-down effect; they could reach a larger audience on the League's behalf. The Indian case shows that decisions regarding particular target audiences were inherently political as well. The Information Section showed little interest in India in the 1920s and was pushed by the Indian delegation in the League's Assembly to increase allocated funds. In their work in the 1930s, officials showed no engagement with the new nationalist elite in India; priorities lay in Western Europe and the United States.

The reports once again show the importance of following the work of the individuals working in the League bureaucracy. The network and experience of officials was considered crucial for the strategy to have effect. While plans were discussed in Geneva, the course of the mission depended on the initiative of the League officials. Over the course of the interwar period, little professionalization is visible in how this system

was used, and in how the officials reported on their work. Especially in the 1930s, missions were organized in combination with the officials' periods of leave, which meant that countries with fewer officials in the Secretariat were visited much less often. In their style of reporting, it becomes clear that officials relied on their own vision to capture the state of the League. They used their knowledge of the country they covered to find the best way to promote the League.

The bureaucrats promoting the League encountered tensions inherent to international organizations, as they had, especially during visits to the member states, to take national agendas of member states into account in their work. How the role of the missions of international civil servants developed over the course of the twentieth century deserves further investigation, but it is clear that the League's information strategies were evaluated in the preparation of the United Nations in the 1940s. The budget allocated to these strategies was greatly increased and with it the conception of the public became wider.⁸⁵ Creating direct lines of communication with the public in member states was deemed more and more important by the officials in international organizations. Whereas the League only had a permanent information office in a handful of countries, the United Nations Department for Public Information increased its presence to 63 countries today; one of the first of these information offices opened in India and was a direct continuation of the League's office there.

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Abstract

Throughout the interwar period, officials of the League of Nations Secretariat travelled across the world to conduct activities for the international organization. Building on the emerging literature on the work of the first generation of international civil servants, this article will show how these missions became an integral part of the work of the League's Information Section to conduct a form of diplomacy, and bring the work of the League in the public eye. In the reports they wrote, officials tried to capture the state of public opinion on the League and described what they did to improve it.

About the Author

Pelle van Dijk is a historian researching the history of public diplomacy in the interwar period. He recently obtained his PhD from the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. In his thesis 'We must work with a missionary spirit': The League of Nations Information Section and public diplomacy he studies the activity of Secretariat officials around the world, focusing on the attempts to promote the League of Nations in India, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United States. Currently, he is a policy officer at the Dutch Research Council (NWO), where he coordinates the Veni postdoc grant.