

NEW APPROACHES TO THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Global, Digital, Institutional, Biographical

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ABSTRACT: This brief introduction aims to situate this special issue's contributions within the broader historiographical shifts in the scholarship on the League of Nations. Particularly, it highlights how global, digital, institutional and biographical approaches have helped reveal the sheer scale and complexity of the League's role in interwar world ordering. The second aim of the introduction is to shed light on the work process leading up to this special issue: it involved several research-based courses, an integrated digital history project, and tailored seminars to turn exams into articles.

KEYWORDS: League of Nations, global history, digital history, biography, research-based teaching



Historiographical reflections

Following the First World War, the League of Nations (1920-1946) was set up as the first standing international organization (IO) with a global scope. The aim was to foster multilateral cooperation, maintain economic stability and secure peace along the lines of the victorious powers. A deeply flawed yet innovative laboratory of global governance within a range policy fields, the League transformed the international sphere: With it, some of the basic mechanics of modern multilateral politics found their initial shape and the threshold to the 20th and 21st century – centuries of world organizations – was crossed. Despite the onset of the Second World War, the fundamental design of the League and its institutional set-up, would be adjusted and enhanced in a second generation of international organizations – the UN, EU, NATO and more – that remain with us today.

Our understanding of the League of Nations has changed drastically over the last few decades. Moving along from the idea that the outbreak of the Second World War made it, simply, a failure, it is now being reinterpreted as the training grounds of global governance in a multitude of fields (Pedersen 2007). The change was brought on by the so-called transnational turn in international history from the 1990s onwards. While scholarship on the League of Nations in the postwar years to the 1980s predominantly wanted to understand *why it failed*, the new wave of research sought to understand *how it functioned and what it did*. In the 2000s and 2010s, this shift in perspective brought under the historians' gaze the full range of the League's activities, and particularly the landscape beyond traditional 'high politics' – health, economy and finance, intellectual cooperation, international law, social questions, transit etc. – in order to explore the policy shaping powers that lay in the networks of expertise and interests that clustered in Geneva (Mazower 2012; Borowy 2009; Laqua (ed.) 2011; Clavin 2013; Sluga 2013; Kott & Droux (eds.) 2013; Pedersen 2015; Sluga & Clavin (eds.) 2017; Maul 2019; Rodogno 2021). The League is today recognized as a nodal point where the exertion of power was moulded into bureaucratic, technical, and legal procedures of world ordering (Wheatley 2019; Mulder 2022; Herren & Okuda (eds.) 2014; Gram-Skjoldager, Ikonomou & Kahlert (eds.) 2020).

Indeed, this research builds on and feeds into a much more nuanced understanding of the interwar period itself. Long gone are the rigid debates of one or two world wars. First, the First World War, and particularly its violent aftermath, but also the onset of the Second World War, is now studied as experienced very differently depending on geography (among other things). Much of the Balkans (particularly Greece) and the Ottoman Empire/Turkey were at various stages of war from 1912 to 1923 (Gerwarth & Manela 2015; Abbenhuis & Tames 2021; Winters 2023). China's already perforated sovereignty was violated with the Manchurian Crisis and subsequent Japanese invasion from 1931 onwards. The former German colonies and Ottoman territories were incorporated into the League's internationalized colonial governance structure – the Mandates System. They would endure systematic oppression, militarized violence and complete lack of self-determination throughout the interwar period. Recent literature has reaffirmed and centred the League's role in an imperial world order, with Britain and France at its centre, which shaped the UN's creation fundamentally as well (Cf. Anghie 2005; Amrith 2006; Mazower 2009; Pedersen 2015; Bandeira & Monteiro 2017; Smith 2018; Jackson & O'Malley (eds.) 2018; Martin 2022). Second, with the works of historian Zara Steiner, and many others, the 'euro-centric' interwar period has equally been nuanced. It has been divided into a postwar era of careful reconstruction and experimental cooperation, followed by the *hinge years* when economic depression, political crisis, and autocratic challengers broke down the order built up around the League of Nations. This was followed by a 'pre-war' period from 1933 onwards (Hitler's ascent to power being the turning point) (Steiner 2007, 2013; Tooze 2014; Cohrs 2022, Tournès 2022). In short, global and imperial perspectives and international history that moves beyond methodological nationalism, have brought out new facets of the years of the League's existence.

Nuancing such macro- or meso- perspectives have been a surge in research on individuals or groups of people *acting in* the international sphere created and sustained by the League of Nations, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the multiple professional associations and (transnational) political movements of the interwar era, civil society and state administrations.¹ What has emerged is a new appreciation of the complex, multidirectional and oft-frustrated agency of international actors. Studying

¹ On the broader historiography on *internationalisms*: Iriye 1997; Iriye 2004; Davies 2007; Schot & Lagendijk 2008; Laqua 2011; Clavin 2012; Mazower 2012; Sluga 2013; Kaiser & Schot 2014; Pedersen 2015; Rosenboim 2017; Imlay 2018; Kott & Patel (eds.) 2018; Thakur 2021; Wagner 2022.

internationalism and multilateral cooperation ‘from below’, historians Jessica Reinisch and David Brydan note, means appreciating the “ubiquity and heterogeneity of internationalist endeavours” and paying “close attention to how people have been ‘doing internationalism’” (Brydan & Rheinisch (eds.) 2021, 7). Such approaches are useful vehicles to challenge, transcend and connect the neat categorizations that can dominate studies on a larger scale (Almagor et. al. 2023).

The transnational studies of international actors have been complemented with research on the lasting institutional frameworks within and between which these women and men acted. Several scholars have focussed on the structuring potential of the League of Nations, and particularly its Secretariat as an institution, with specific bureaucratic norms and procedures.² The League Secretariat was an institution that combined diplomatic, technocratic, and bureaucratic modalities in distinct and lasting ways and the officials working there were exerting institutionalized forms of power. The interplay of structure, norms and agency is apparent in the many important contributions focussing on women employees of the League Secretariat. These studies are particularly sensitive towards the systemic discrimination inherent in the League Secretariat, despite its lofty ambitions, but also the many unrecognized, informal or disputed forms of power and influence women had in the engine room of the League (Piguet 2019, 2021; McCarthy 2014; Herren 2015; Sluga 2017).

The structured agency of League employees and other international actors of the interwar period has increasingly been investigated by combining biographical approaches (individual lives, collective biographies, and prosopography, social network analyses) with broader analytical scales using digital approaches. Madeleine Herren pioneered this approach with regards to the League of Nations and other international organizations, placing the “boundary-spanners” of international relations at the centre of her analysis of global ordering in the 19th and 20th century (Herren 2009; Herren & Löhr (eds.) 2013; Herren (ed.) 2014). She also headed the important digital history project LONSEA, which created a search engine – based on primary sources and handbooks – to explore networks of internationalists, international officials and international and non-governmental organizations in the interwar period

² For this particular wave of research: Auberer 2016; Tollardo 2016; Gram-Skjoldager & Ikonomou 2019AB; Ikonomou & Gram-Skjoldager (eds.) 2019; Ikonomou 2021; Kahlert 2019; Cloet 2019; Moraes 2019; Gram-Skjoldager, Ikonomou, Kahlert (eds.) 2020; Tyler 2021; Seidenfaden 2022; Mumby 2022. Within historical IR, cf.: Reinalda 2009, 2011, 2013, 2019, 2020.

(Herren, Sibille & Meigen (eds.) 2010–2016). Over the last several years, this trend has been followed up by several social network analyses (SNA) of League of Nations, focussing primarily on the various transnational (business, imperial, philanthropic, educational, ideological, expertise, epistemic etc.) networks that the IO was embedded in, or exploring the broader patterns of the make-up of the organization (Cf. Grandjean 2018).

Emanating from these historiographical and methodological developments is a new understanding of the role played by the League of Nations in bringing about a fundamental transformation of the international sphere: that is, how *the way* multilateral politics were conducted found a lasting institutionalized shape. The repercussions of this have been felt – for better or worse – across the globe and into the present day.

A note on the process

This special issue is the end-result of a source-based course, *The League of Nations: international organization, international politics and internationalism, 1850s-1950s*, offered at the Saxo Institute in spring 2022. In this course the students explored five themes: (1) The emergence of internationalisms in the 19th century; (2) The devastating and transformative impact of the First World War; (3) The Paris Peace Conference and its lasting effects on 20th-century international relations; (4) The organization of the League of Nations and the role it played in interwar politics and technical cooperation; and (5) The legacies and lessons learned from the League into postwar international politics and organization. As seen from the above, the point was neither to recapitulate a narrative of failure, nor to shy away from the many darker sides of the League, as an instrument of Euro-centric civilizational stratification and imperial governance, but to centre on its functions and practices. With offset in the newly digitized archives of the League of Nations, held at the United Nations in Geneva, the central methodological and empirical questions of the course was: *What is* the role of individuals, their experiences and competences, their social backgrounds and networks, their practices and desires, in shaping global politics?

The course was selected for a special programme in research-based teaching experiments, which gave us the opportunity to bring in a unique element, namely social network analysis. To this end, parts of the course was co-taught with Data Specialist Obaida Hanteer, Southern Campus Datalab, and supported by Xiaoyu Shi (DIKU, MA Student) and Jonas Tilsted (Saxo, BA Student). The network analysis aimed to trace the career trajectories, professional backgrounds, nationalities and genders of the permanent staff

of the League of Nations Secretariat as it mapped on to its various branches and sections. The network analysis builds on two sets of prosopographical data (standardized biographical information): The already-mentioned LONSEA database, created a decade ago at Heidelberg University, consisting of key biographical information (name, age, gender, nationality) as well as contractual information (position, rank, start of contract and end of contract) of all employees of the League Secretariat (and many more). And, secondly, the newly generated dataset from the so-called LONTAD-project (the United Nations Library & Archives Geneva's digitalization of all 15,000,000 pages of the League of Nations Archives). The added value of the LONTAD prosopographical dataset is that it contains information about educational and professional backgrounds of League staff, and to some extent career trajectories after their contracts ended. The students learnt how to visualize networks in *Gephi*, which is an open-source software dedicated to network visualization. The network-based analysis could be part of the written exam papers, though this was no requirement.

The course was also an integrated part of the project *Visualizing the League of Nations Secretariat (VisuaLeague)*. VisuaLeague is a digital research tool where users can (1) select, combine and search on nationality, gender, institutional entity, division and position within any given time span of the League Secretariat's existence freely, (2) visualize statistical representations of one's choices and (3) browse and download prosopographical data curated by oneself. The preparatory work of the team of instructors and scholars – Obaida, Xiaoyu, Jonas and myself – together with the visualizations, findings, questions, ideas and trouble-shooting of the students, played an instrumental part in its development. In the fall of 2022, Jonas Tilsted completed an internship at the UN Library & Archives Geneva, while Yuan Chen (DIKU, MA Student) became a central part of the project. This allowed us to work systematically – with data cleaning, coding and layout – towards the project's completion in February 2023. VisuaLeague is freely available and can be accessed here: <https://visualeague-researchtool.com/>.

Meanwhile, in the fall of 2022, I convened two seminars, with eight students motivated to develop their exam papers from the spring course into a special issue for Culture & History. The first seminar was devoted to re-writing the introduction and premise of the paper, laying out structure of the eventual journal article. The second seminar had the format of a workshop, where the students presented reworked, first-draft articles, and received comments and questions from experts in the field. We thank Karin van

Leeuwen (Maastricht University), Laura Almagor (University of Utrecht), Michael Jonas (Helmut-Schmidt-Universität Hamburg), Vera Fritz (University of Copenhagen) and Emil Seidenfaden (University of Copenhagen) for their insightful interventions. The contributions to this special issue have thus taken colour from many scholars across disciplines, several different work processes (lectures, digital experiments, writing workshops etc.) and an ongoing research project with multiple institutional partners. Exploring the range of the digitized League of Nations Archives, Hav P. Leu, Nils Holm, Malika Shaakerimova, Jonas Tilsted, Cecilie Plambeck-Grotum, Rasmus Andersson, Jacob Nedergaard and Sebastian Vang Jensen pursue genuinely new approaches to the League of Nations and international cooperation more broadly – from global, digital, institutional and biographical perspectives. Together, they bring home the sheer scale and complexity of the League of Nations attempt at ordering the world.



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