

DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

An Analysis of the League of Nations Secretariat's
Political Section, 1919-1939

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ABSTRACT: This article studies interwar diplomacy. It does so, through the lens of the League of Nations Secretariat's Political Section. It seeks to uncover how the section was created and how it was meant to operate. Using a prosopographical social network analysis the article dynamically maps the composition of the Political Section and what characterised the section. It studies how the employees worked and which form of agency they had. As such, the article has four key findings. First, the section was highly professionalised with more than 60% having a background in diplomacy providing the expertise and qualifications to handle diplomatic conflicts. Second, the section had high diversity in the nationality of the employees and a relatively low amount of British and French employees. Third, the employees of the Political Section generally had a high degree of agency regarding how they handled conflicts which they could use to expand their tasks and area of responsibility. Last, the ability to control information was the most important competence for the officials of the Political Section. On a methodological level, this paper provides an example of how social network analysis can be a useful tool in historical studies.

KEYWORDS: Institutional history, diplomatic relations, League of Nations, agency, actor-based approach



Introduction

“[...] I think it would be a mistake for Monsieur de Montenach, as a member of the Secretariat, to pay a visit to Upper Silesia at the present time”,¹ wrote Eric Drummond, the first Secretary-General of the League of Nations Secretariat, about an employee of the Political Section. To Drummond’s discontent, Monsieur de Montenach nonetheless went to Upper Silesia. Which form of agency did the employees of the Political Section have, since they seemingly could go against the Secretary-General? And could the employees influence the outcome of conflicts and disputes?

The League of Nations was created in 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference. Its primary task was to secure world peace.² The Political Section was one of 11-14 different sections that formed the core of the Secretariat. The number of sections varied because they were at times combined or split. Besides the core, the Secretariat had an internal administration. Each section was in charge of either a political or technical question. These could be, but were not limited to, health, disarmament, and social questions. The Secretariat did the preparatory work and was the civil service of the two other organs of the League: The Assembly and the Council. In the preparatory work the Secretariat could not propose solutions to conflicts. The Council and Assembly had the decision-making abilities. When a solution was found, it was the task of the Secretariat to supervise its execution (Ranshofen-Wertheimer, 1945: 19).

Among employees of the Secretariat there was a clear internal hierarchy. The highest-ranking official was the Secretary-General. Below him was the Deputy-Secretary-General followed by the Under-Secretary-Generals. The latter was in charge of a section of the Secretariat. All three positions had an office with employees attached to it. The sections with no Under-Secretary-General in charge had either a Director or Chief of Section with Director ranking highest of the two. All the employees

¹ “Protection of Minorities in Upper Silesia [...]”, 1922: 8. United Nations Archives Geneva - League of Nations Archives (LONA) R1671-41-20675-24751.

² “League of Nations Covenant” UN Geneva accessed 18/01-23, <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/covenant-lon>.

were placed in one of three divisions.³ I will focus on the employees in the first division who handled conflict-related work.

This article will study the Political Section of the League of Nations Secretariat and the employees of the section. While the Secretariat had no decision-making abilities (Ranshofen-Wertheimer, 1945: 17-20; Kahlert, 2019: 200) the informal structures of the Secretariat allowed the employees to influence the decisions in other ways. Whether it was possible depended on the employees, their competence, and their agency. I will set out with the question: *How was the Political Section composed, and which form of agency did the employees have?*

The article will start by studying the creation of the Political Section. A social network analysis (SNA) will be used to uncover the prosopographical traits of the employees of the section and show the composition of the section. Prosopography is the analysis of the characteristics of a group of individuals whose personal biography might otherwise be untraceable. For this analysis nationality and professional background were the most important factors, as they defined how the section and employees functioned. The connection between micro and macro perspectives can sometimes be hard to find. SNA can help uncover the connection between the two (Granovetter, 1973: 1360). In my analysis the micro perspective is the individual employee's nationality and background. The macro perspective is how the Political Section was organised, how it functioned and how it handled its workload. In order to analyse the professional backgrounds of the officials, I have created 20 different categories of backgrounds, with the use of information from the personnel files of the individual employees of the Secretariat. This analysis can show how specific nationalities and backgrounds were connected to the different sections. The SNA will be supported by documents from the League's Appointments Committee – the committee where the highest-ranking officials of the Secretariat discussed the hiring of high-level officials to the Secretariat.

Next, I will study how the section worked by looking at how different employees handled specific conflicts. Along with the study of the section's creation this can uncover both the formal and

³ Personnel List. LONA S967.

informal structures under which the employees functioned. This can provide an understanding of which form of agency the employees had.

State of the art

The Political Section was one of the original sections and started working before the Secretariat was fully functional (Ranshofen-Wertheimer, 1945: 101). Within the Secretariat's internal hierarchy, the Political Section was placed the highest. Whenever a job was available here it was sought after, and a transfer from other parts of the Secretariat to the Political Section was considered a promotion (Kahlert, 2020: 65). When all other sections suffered budget cuts in the start of the 1930's the budget of the Political Section remained untouched, and even saw an increase at the end of the 1930s (Tyler, 2018). The section handled some high-profile conflicts. Despite its central role in the Secretariat there is practically no research that focus solely and explicitly on the section.

The lack of research on the Political Section and its modus operandi is noticeable when looking at the rest of the historiography of the League. The focus has changed from seeing the League as a failure to looking at how the first International Organisation (IO) operated. This historiographic turn can't be ascribed to a specific set of factors, however, there are two factors that were influential. The first factor is the transnational turn in international history more generally. Researchers have begun to use the study of the League as an entrance point to follow different aspects of the League's work across borders (Gram-Skjoldager, 2019). The second factor is captured in an article written by Susan Pedersen in 2007 called "Back to the League of Nations". In this article she calls for researchers to study the League's modus operandi and what it meant at the time. This foreshadowed research focusing on the inside of the League and, particularly, the various policy areas under its domain. For Pedersen, it is important to study the employees of the Secretariat as they were the ones doing the work. To do this it is important to use the League of Nations archives (Pedersen, 2007: 1116).

Among the researchers who followed the turn in historiography, this new focus in the research

[...] is essential not only to enhance our understanding of the League and interwar internationalism themselves, but also to help us gain a firmer purchase on the intractable political and ethical problems of global governance in the present. (Finney, 2019: 275)

The increased focus on the employees of the Secretariat has led Haakon A. Ikonomou and Karen Gram-Skjoldager to argue that the League of Nations not only created an institution for a new kind of multilateral diplomacy. It also created a new profession: The international civil servant (ICS) (Gram-Skjoldager & Ikonomou, 2020: 215). The institutionalization of this new profession started quickly after the creation and initial staffing of the Secretariat. For Eric Drummond it was important to hire ICS who were loyal to this new institution and not their home country. Therefore, he tried to implement “[...] the multinational mode of organization with his internationalist ideals of a neutral, independent civil service working for the common interests among the League’s member states.” (Gram-Skjoldager & Ikonomou, 2020: 223). Gram-Skjoldager and Ikonomou (2020: 226-229) trace the idea of the international civil servant from the League to the present in organisations like the United Nations.

The prosopographical approach and the LONSEA database used in this article were also used in two articles by Torsten Kahlert (Kahlert, 2019; Kahlert, 2020). The prosopographical approach studies the traits of a group of people, through a standardized set of questions (or categories). For this article, I use an upgraded version of the LONSEA database, which I created for the VisuaLeague project. (Ikonomou et al., 2023) This dataset includes nationality, length of contracts, gender, position, and division. In the upgrade, I have added professional background. Further, drawing on the original personnel files and the datasets coming out of the LONTAD-project (the UN-led digitizing of the League archives), the dataset has been cleaned and upgraded, securing better precision, but also new categories such as “professional background”. The prosopographical approach is especially useful to study the actors behind “the great men” (Kahlert, 2019: 197). Kahlert argues that it is important to study the employees because they were “[...] important cultural brokers, shapers of policies and carriers of the ideals of the organizations” (Kahlert, 2020: 49). They could set the agenda and were a big part of the decision-making process (Kahlert, 2019: 191).

The Secretariat was not static; it is, thus, important to study the Secretariat dynamically (Kahlert, 2019: 191). In his study, Kahlert shows that the Secretariat evolved. It adapted to the tasks with which it was met. Kahlert ascribes this ability to the fact that the Secretariat had few formal demands (Kahlert, 2019: 199). The dynamic aspect of the Secretariat can also be seen in the prosopography of the Directors (who were the heads of functional sections). Kahlert identifies three generations of Directors (Kahlert, 2019: 192-193). I apply a dynamic study of the composition of the Political Section. It will use the three generations of directors as the timeframe. The dates will follow the three directors' contracts: Paul Mantoux 1919-1927, Yotaro Sugimura 1927-1933 and Frank P. Walters 1933-1939.

The article will first propose the analytical framework I apply to study the agency of the employees of the Political Section; then it will turn to the professional and national composition of the section and how that affected the section's ability to function and handle different conflicts. Lastly, the article will study the practices and agency of the Political Section through the actions of specific employees. The core argument of the article is that the employees of the Political Section had a relatively high degree of agency, especially regarding the way, they performed the tasks, and that this was anchored in their ability to gather, share, and use information.

Diplomatic agency – an analytical framework

“Diplomacy does not take place simply between states but wherever people live in different groups” (Sharp, 2009: i). Therefore, diplomacy is “[...] a practice – for handling certain kinds of relations between human beings” (Sharp, 2009: 13). It is a system of communication, negotiation and information (Der Derian, 1987: 6-7, 216). For New Diplomatic History, a recent turn in the historical study of diplomacy, information-gathering is an important aspect of the diplomat's work, which includes a much broader range of actors than merely official diplomats (Scott-Smith & Weisbrode, 2019: 3). This aspect was in fact a key part of the work of the Political Section.

The employees of an IO, the ICS, have the ability to start and change the direction of debates and affect the IO by using the resources that it possesses (Xu & Weller, 2008: 35-37). This ability is a result of two factors: formal institutional circumstances and informal possibilities that ICS create

themselves. These two factors are key to understanding the role of the ICS (Xu & Weller, 2008: 44). As Kahlert argued the Secretariat had few formal institutional demands.

The formal institutional circumstances are created by treaties and other regulations. They can be defined as formal agency and defines the ICS' ability to function. The informal factors are the ICS' own competences, legitimacy, and culture (Xu & Weller, 2008: 44). These elements form part of what can be defined as informal agency. This study will try to identify both the formal agency – as defined by the leaders of the Secretariat – and the informal agency of the ICS. The latter shows that the ICSs can define their own role.

The perhaps most important competence for an ICS is the control of information. The ICS analyses information and chooses which information to pass on. This in turn dictates the direction of debates and, therefore, shapes the outcome (Xu & Weller, 2008: 46). I will attempt to determine how this was achieved through the study of how the section worked. A second competence that the ICS possesses is technical expertise. If an IO is technically specialised it is less open to political insecurities. This provides the ICS with the possibility to get more influence on the outcome of conflicts (Xu & Weller, 2008: 40-41). The study of the employees' background will determine whether the section was technically specialised. The legitimacy of the ICS comes from the fact, that they are multinational and ostensibly have no loyalty to their home country (Xu & Weller, 2008: 41-42, 47). An aspect that was important for Drummond. Political scientists Yi-Chong Xu and Patrick Weller describe ICSs as not only passive receivers of information. They function as they find most fitting and will try to expand their areas of responsibilities. Whether they can do this depends on their competence (Xu & Weller, 2008: 40). When there is no clear demarcation of the ICSs' functions, a possibility appears for the ICS to expand their jurisdiction and take on responsibilities that were not originally intended for them (Xu & Weller, 2008: 45).

The composition of the Political Section

The start of the section

The Political Section was one of the original sections. The tasks of the section were clear from the start while also allowing some freedom.⁴ One of the main tasks of the section was to compare and analyse the information it received. They would then make a report to the Secretary-General, the Council or the Assembly. The report had to be objective and impartial.⁵ They would receive the information from states, private parties, or the other sections in the Secretariat. The importance of receiving complete and comprehensive information was key to the functioning of the section.⁶ The freedom they had in this task was, that they chose which information to bring forward in the report and which information to leave out. Because the Secretariat was international it was important that “[...] [it] should be denied any power of its own [...]”.⁷ Therefore they should not recommend a solution to the Council or the Assembly; the solution should come from national beliefs.⁸ Their control of information meant that they could nevertheless influence the solution.

The second main task of the Political Section was to keep an eye on different political situations and developments. They did this to be able to warn the Secretary-General, the Council or the Assembly about situations that might result in conflicts.⁹ The Political Section was in this sense a political watchdog making sure that the Covenant or the treaties weren't violated. To do this in the best possible way, Drummond thought that it would be beneficial to organise the section in geographically specialised groups.¹⁰ This task also allowed for some freedom for the section, as the employees chose which situations were monitored. This choice was limited by the geographical area assigned to the employee and the expectation of the director.¹¹

⁴ “Organisation of the League - Minute stating temporary Staff necessary to begin with and outlining Scheme”, 1919: 2. LONA R1455-29-255-255.

⁵ “The League of Nations - S.G, Mr Butler - Memo by Secretary General on Organisation and Functions of the League of Nations and Notes thereon by Mr Butler”, 1919: 4. LONA R1455-29-262-255.

⁶ “The League of Nations - S.G, Mr Butler [...]”, 1919: 6 & 11. LONA R1455-29-262-255.

⁷ “The League of Nations - S.G, Mr Butler [...]”, 1919: 4. LONA R1455-29-262-255.

⁸ “The League of Nations - S.G, Mr Butler [...]”, 1919: 4-5. LONA R1455-29-262-255.

⁹ “The League of Nations - S.G, Mr Butler [...]”, 1919: 4. LONA R1455-29-262-255.

¹⁰ “Organization and work of the League – Memo”, 1919: 9. LONA R1455-29-260-255.

¹¹ “Report on the composition, functions and activities of the Political Section”, 1921: 2. LONA C-E-2_EN.

Because the League of Nations was a new and untried system, the first director of the Political Section – French national Paul Mantoux – did not think that one could expect states to send their most confidential documents.¹² If the documents that states sent were only vague commonalities, no useful information could be gained from them. Therefore, it had to be made clear for states that they had to send complete and comprehensive information.¹³ To deal with this problem Mantoux thought that the section should hire experts and it should be possible for these experts to visit the states in conflict as this would allow for a comprehensive study of it.¹⁴

The *modus operandi* of the Political Section was discussed by Mantoux, Drummond and American national, Raymond B. Fosdick – Under-General-Secretary until it was clear that the US would not be a member of the League. Despite Drummond and Fosdick agreeing that complete information was essential, and states could not be expected to send this, they did not believe that it would be wise to send officials from the Secretariat to study conflicts.¹⁵

This discussion needs to be seen in the context of early interwar relations and the states that the three represented. France saw the League as a way to secure French security and a way to secure that the restrictions imposed on Germany, through the Treaty of Versailles following their defeat in the First World War, was kept. Therefore, they wanted a League with the proper means to secure peace (Pedersen, 2007: 1115). Woodrow Wilson had a hard time getting support for joining the League from US Senate and Congress. Therefore, it was important for the American representatives that the League would not have too much influence in national policies (Mazower, 2013: 118-119). For Britain the focus was on functionality and bureaucracy. Drummond didn't want the Political Section to have the role that Mantoux wanted. This would give the section too much power and could potentially compromise the unassailable neutrality of the bureaucracy.

¹² "Functions of the Political Section - Mr. Mantoux - Memo on the Functions of the Political Section.", 1919: 10. LONA R552-11-1169-1169.

¹³ "Functions of the Political Section - Mr. Mantoux - Memo on the Functions of the Political Section.", 1919: 11. LONA R552-11-1169-1169.

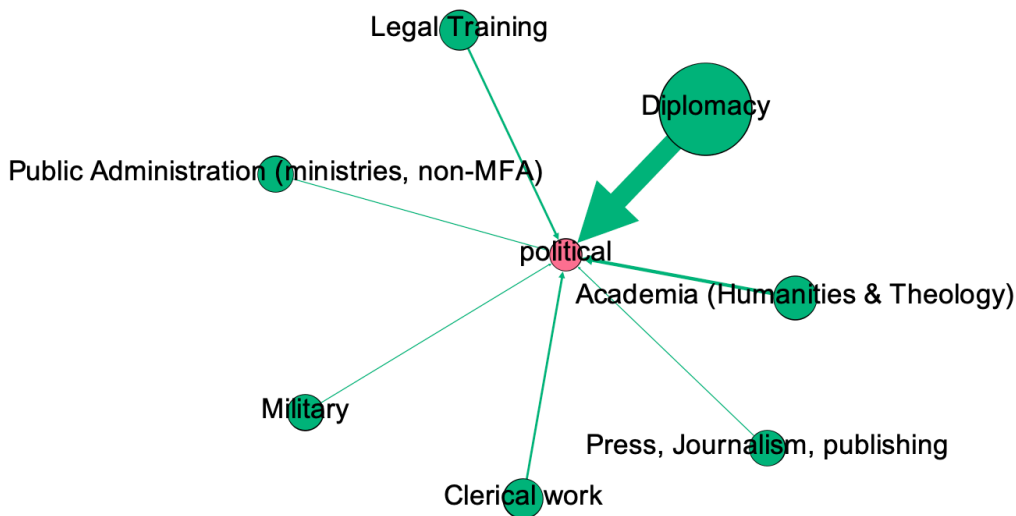
¹⁴ "Functions of the Political Section - Mr. Mantoux - Memo on the Functions of the Political Section.", 1919: 10-11. LONA R552-11-1169-1169.

¹⁵ "Functions of the Political Section - Mr. Mantoux - Memo on the Functions of the Political Section.", 1919: 2-5. LONA R552-11-1169-1169.

Who was hired?

As can be seen from *figure 1*, 61% of the first division employees, that is the highest rank of international officials, in the Political Section had a background in diplomacy. This was a crucial aspect of how the section functioned. An important competence for diplomats was their ability to control information. Which mattered for the Political Section. The diplomatic background gave the employees an understanding of political information and the international world, which was essential to the section as their work with political information was continuous.¹⁶ The high number of diplomats gave the section the ability to handle and analyse the information they were provided with.

Figure 1: Background for first division employees in Political Section.



¹⁶ "Appointments Committee, January 1922-August 1923": 12. LONA S954-263-1.

Figure 2 demonstrates that the professionalisation of the section started right away; 5 of the 8 employees in 1919-1927 had a background in diplomacy.

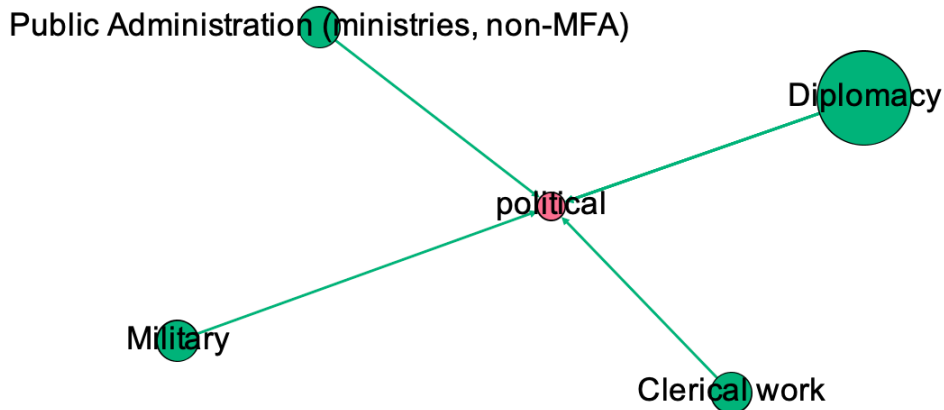


Figure 2: Background for first division employees in the Political Section, 1919-1927.

This trend was a part of Mantoux’s hopes; a section composed of experts able to deal with the political issues that might emerge in the international world. In 1927-1933 the section was still largely composed of diplomats as can be seen from figure 3.

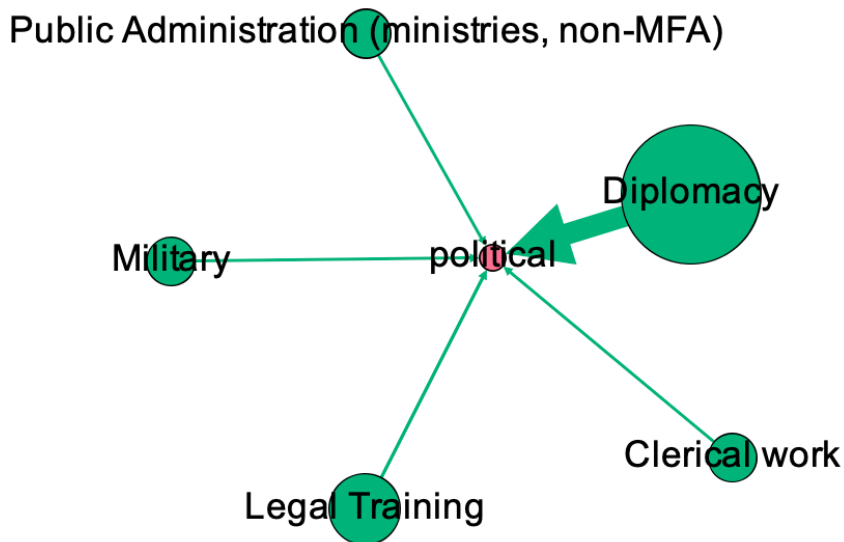


Figure 3: Background for first division employees in the Political Section, 1927-1933.

However, employees with legal training were also hired. This was an important factor for Yotaro Sugimura – the Director of the Political Section at that time. He believed that it would give the

section the best prerequisites to handle conflicts of different character.¹⁷ The employees with legal training expanded the section's area of expertise. Sugimura himself had a doctorate in law.¹⁸ This could have influenced his preference of employees with legal training.

Figure 4 shows that the professionalisation started under Mantoux and partially continued under Sugimura, was also continued during the time of the last director of the Political Section, Frank P. Walters. 1933-1939 saw the highest number of employees with a background in diplomacy, i.e., 2/3 of the employees.

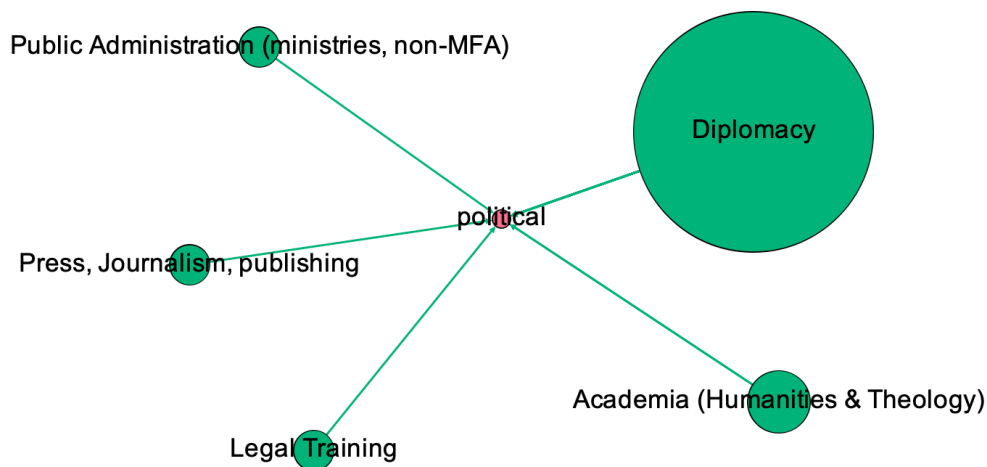


Figure 4: Background for first division employees in the Political Section, 1933-1939.

This high number was unique to the Political Section. It was important that the employees of the Political Section had a great knowledge of the political world.¹⁹ For comparison, looking at figure 5, 6 and 7, diplomacy is not the most common background among the employees in other sections. A comparison of the four figures – 1, 5, 6, and 7 – shows that each section was professionalised towards its specific functional demands. Accordingly, for the Information Section, a press

¹⁷ "Appointments Committee, January 1927-August 1928": 581. LONA S956-265-1.

¹⁸ "Yotaro Sugimura Personal File" LONA S889-194-3406.

¹⁹ "Appointments Committee, May 1930-December 1931": 315. LONA S957-266-1.

background was dominant, for the Legal Section it was legal training and for the Disarmament Section it was a military one.

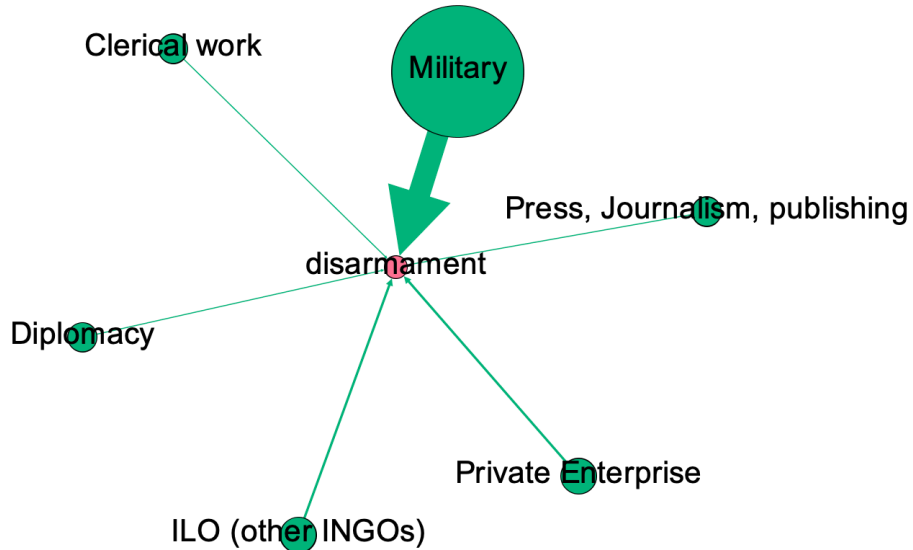
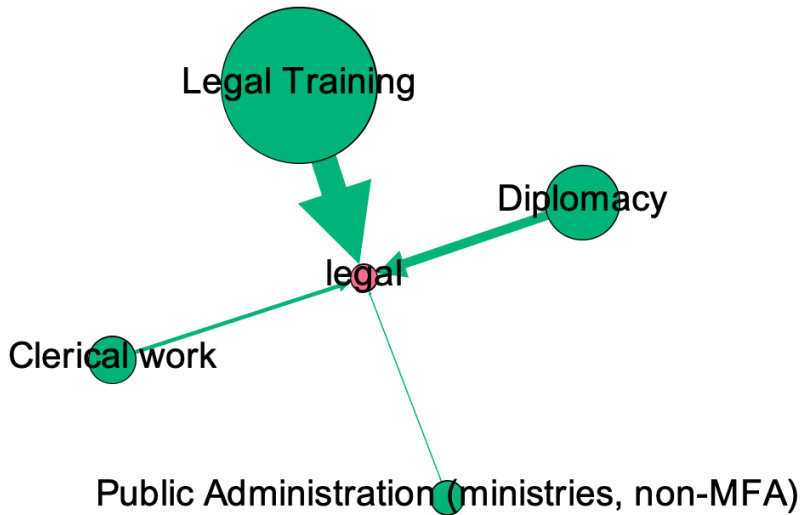


Figure 5: Background for first division employees in the Disarmament Section.

Figure 6: Background for first division employees in the Legal Section.



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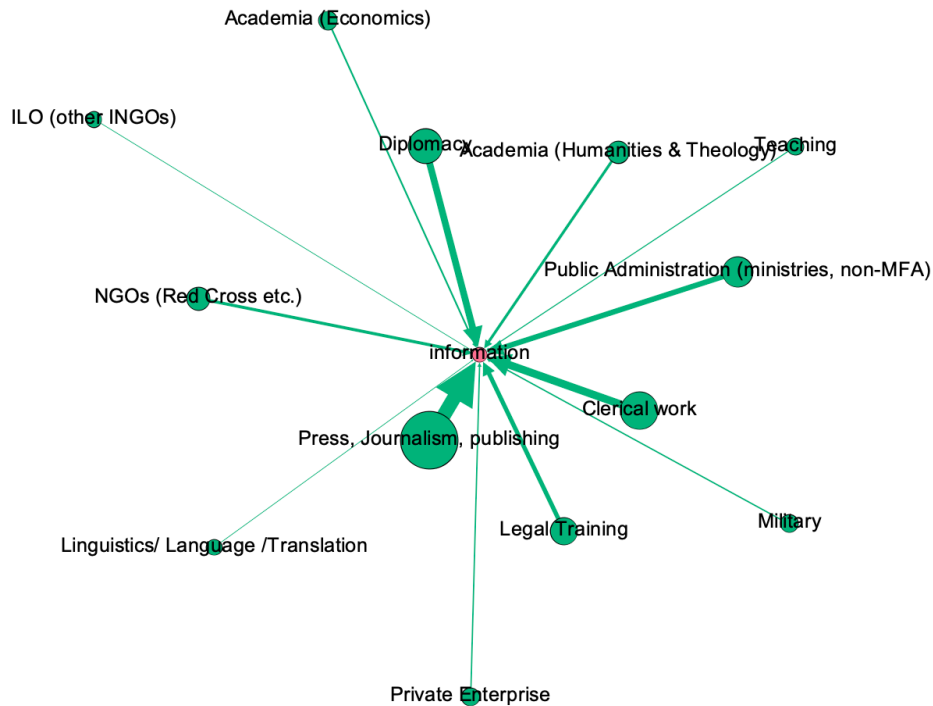


Figure 7: Background for first division employees in the Information Section.

The comparison of the figures above also shows that in the Political Section, more varying backgrounds were present. The only exception was the Information Section which by far had the most employees. The Political Section dealt with different types of conflicts, e.g., it sometimes had to deal with disarmament issues or minorities issues as part of the conflict.²⁰ Because of the diverse nature of the conflicts, it was important for the section to have a variety of experts, which the different backgrounds provided.

The discussion of employment of two employees in the Appointments Committee exemplifies the competences the section was looking for in their employees. In both cases their diplomatic qualifications, background and experience with diplomatic work were highlighted.²¹ In the case of the Swede, Bertil Arne Renborg, his knowledge of countries with which his home country had no affiliations, was seen as a positive competence.²² This would give the section neutrality and

²⁰ "Appointments Committee, January 1927-August 1928": 291. LONA S956-265-1.

²¹ "Appointments Committee, May 1930-December 1931": 327. LONA S957-266-1; "Appointments Committee, January-December 1926": 124. LONA S955-264-2.

²² "Appointments Committee, May 1930-December 1931": 327. LONA S957-266-1.

objectivity which was essential. The members of the Appointments Committee also mentioned objectivity and neutrality for the German diplomat, Cecil von Renthe-Fink.²³

Another factor that influenced the composition and the functions of the section was the nationalities of the employees. It decided which conflicts that the employees dealt with.²⁴ The employees handled communications and cooperation with the government of their home country.²⁵ The section could not have employees from all member states. This didn't mean that it could not handle conflicts or communication and cooperation in the rest of the world. If the section lacked employees from a given country, an employee hailing from a neighbouring country or an employee with knowledge of the country – like Bertil Arne Renborg – was beneficial to handle communications and conflicts.²⁶

As seen in figure 8, the Political Section had the highest diversity in the nationalities of the employees. The section had 1.95 employees per nationality compared to the Disarmament Section (2.5), Mandate Section (2.1), Information Section (7.7) and the Legal Section (2.2).²⁷ The Political Section was one of the sections with the fewest employees. However, this was not a deciding factor for national diversity; both the Mandate Section and the Disarmament Section had fewer employees yet lower national diversity. The national diversity in the Political Section enhanced the section's ability to handle conflicts and communications around the world. The relation between the League and national governments was important as this was the main way for the League to get information about conflicts.

It was essential to maintain the high national diversity in the section. As such, the leaders of the League moved employees from one section to another.²⁸ At other times the Appointments Committee only considered applicants with a certain nationality.²⁹ Even though the leaders of the

²³ "Appointments Committee, January-December 1926": 124. LONA S955-264-2.

²⁴ "Appointments Committee, August 1924-December 1925": 640. LONA S955-264-1.

²⁵ "Appointments Committee, January 1927-August 1928": 432. LONA S956-265-1; "Appointments Committee, September 1928-April 1930": 477. LONA S956-265-2.

²⁶ "Appointments Committee, May 1930-December 1931": 327. LONA S957-266-1.

²⁷ Updated LONSEA-Database.

²⁸ "Appointments Committee, January-December 1926": 358. LONA S955-262-2.

²⁹ "Appointments Committee, January 1932-December 1934": 125. LONA S957-266-2; "Appointments Committee May 1930-December 1931": 515. LONA S957-266-1.

League sought to have non-Europeans in the section,³⁰ the Political Section was highly Eurocentric. The First division consisted also only of men. (Ikonomou et al., 2023)

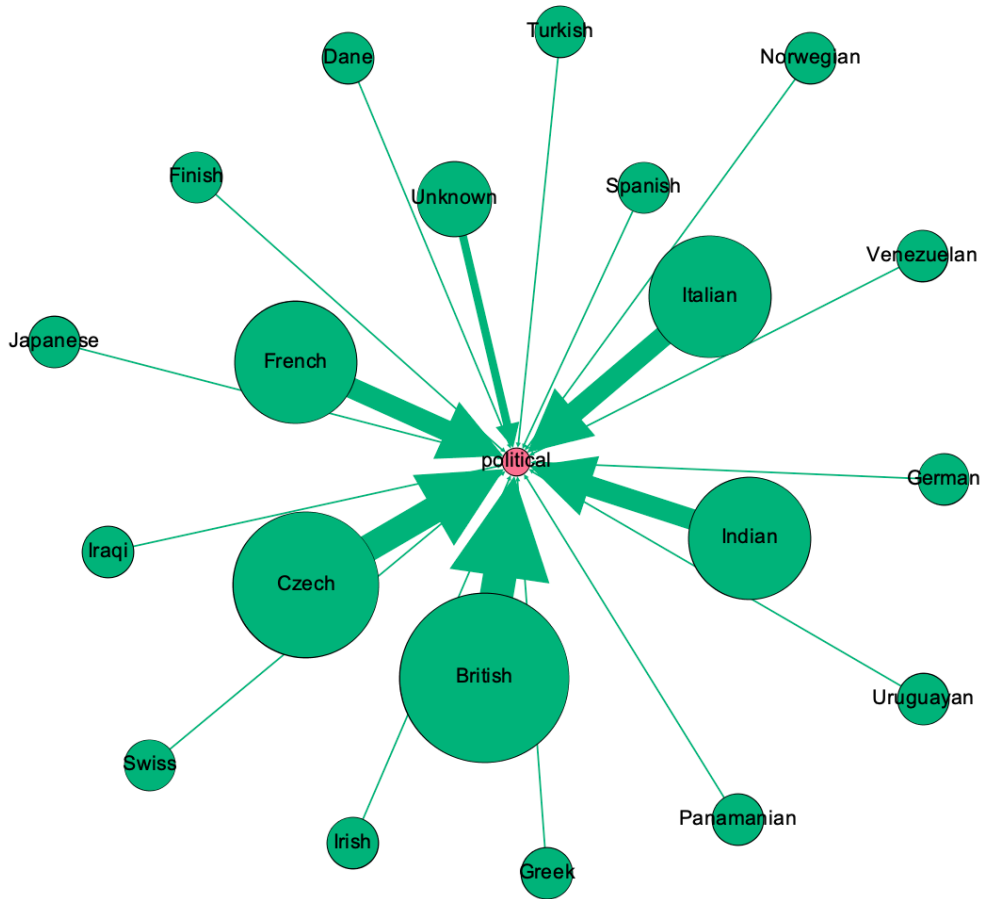


Figure 8: Nationality for first division employees in the Political Section.

The Political Section had a high national diversity from the start. This can be seen from figure 9. Across the Secretariat most employees were from the great powers, France and Britain. However, this was not as distinct in the Political Section. While British and French remained the biggest groups, the group of Italians was almost as big. Further the section had employees from the whole world and not just Western Europeans. This gave them expertise in a wide range of geographical areas.

³⁰ "Appointments Committee May 1930-December 1931": 705. LONA S957-266-1.

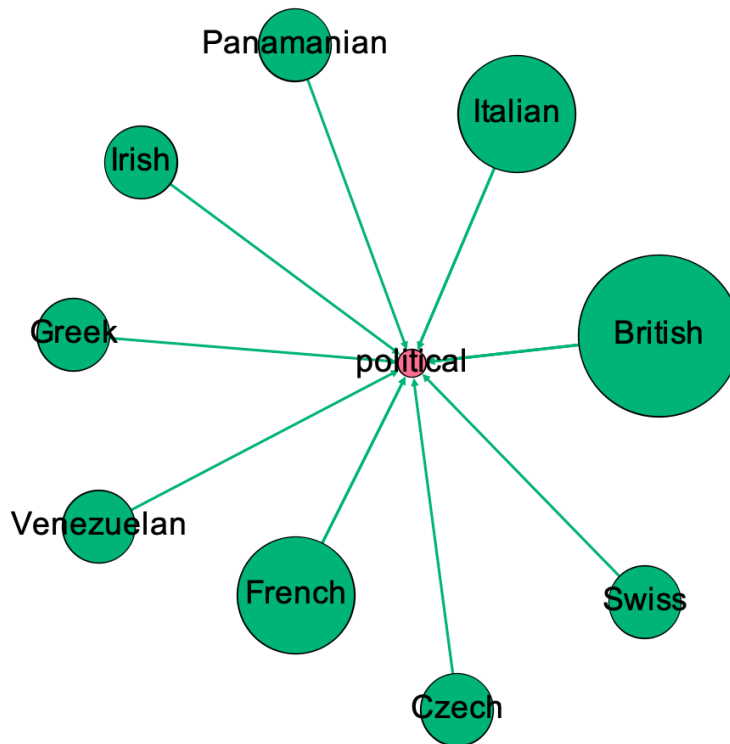


Figure 9: Nationality for first division employees in the Political Section, 1919-1927.

Figure 10 demonstrates that the tendency from the first period continued in the second period and was even enhanced. There were no French employees, and the British employees were not the biggest group. In the second period a high number of Czech employees were hired. This was due to a high number of conflicts in Eastern Europe as can be seen from the documents of the Political Section.³¹ Furthermore, the Czech diplomatic service was highly ranked in the international hierarchy.³² The high number of Czech employees provided the section with the necessary geographic expertise that was needed when handling the many conflicts. This resulted in replacing Czech employees with new Czechs when the old employees resigned.³³

The importance of keeping employees of certain nationalities which were beneficial to handling specific conflicts is exemplified by the employment of the Greek Thanassis Aghnides in the Political

³¹ LONA Political Section Registry and Section Files.

³² "Appointments Committee October 1923-June 1924": 360. LONA S954-263-2.

³³ "Appointments Committee January 1927-August 1928": 350. LONA S956-265-1.

Section. In 1927 and 1928 it was discussed whether Aghnides should be transferred to another section. This was at a time when the Political Section handled many conflicts in Greece and surrounding countries. Aghnides had great knowledge of Greek culture and he was in charge of all communication and cooperation with the Greek government. This was vital for the section and Aghnides had a huge role in handling these conflicts. Therefore, Sugimura opposed his transfer.³⁴

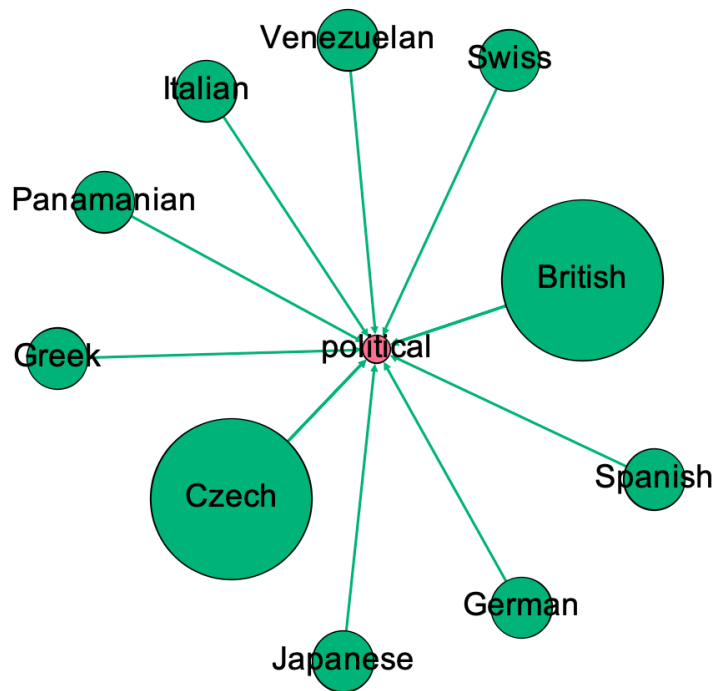


Figure 10: Nationality for first division employees in the Political Section, 1927-1933.

As can be seen from figure 11 the Political Section had even greater national diversity in the third period. Further, only a few nationalities, including British and French, were represented by more than one employee. The higher number of nationalities correlated to a higher number of member states. The section was ranked highest in the internal hierarchy of the Secretariat. Therefore, member states wanted an employee in the Political Section from their country.³⁵ As such, the section continued to have a high national diversity, leading to the section's high geographic expertise.

³⁴ "Appointments Committee January 1927-August 1928": 477-478. LONA S956-265-1.

³⁵ "Appointments Committee October 1923-June 1924": 460. LONA S954-263-2.

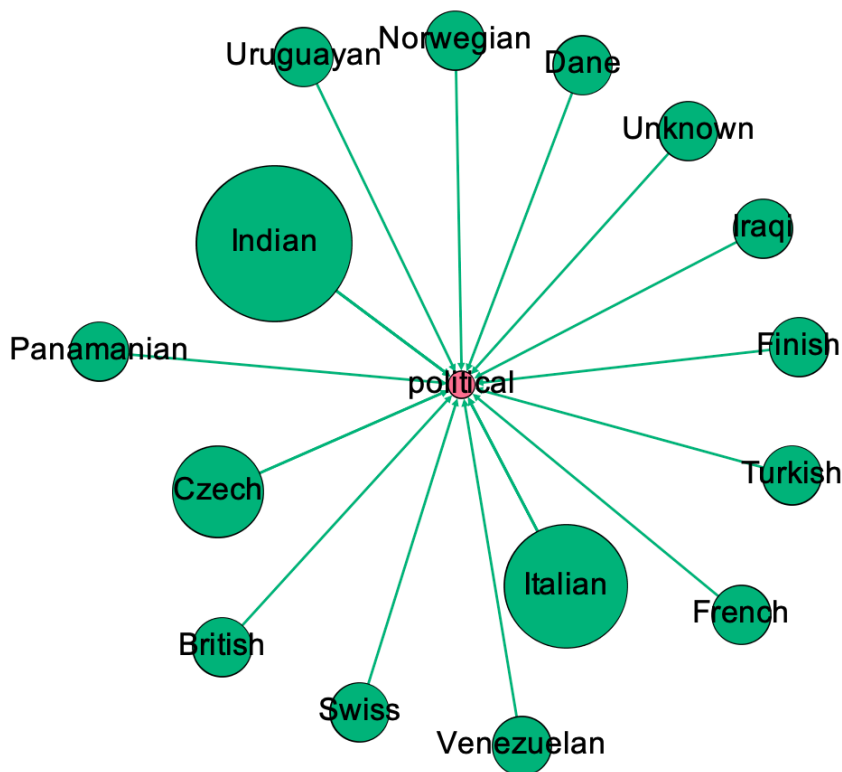


Figure 11: Nationality for first division employees in the Political Section, 1933-1939.

How did they work?

By briefly diving into the work of specific employees in different conflicts, this section will study how the Political Section and its employees functioned to uncover which form of agency the employees had. The documents created by the officials of the section show their actions; while the official documents can give insights into the formal restrictions the officials operated under.

Only the Political Section and its employees had the competence and qualifications to handle disputes of a political character. Therefore, they were to assist other sections with such disputes. The cooperation between the Political Section and the Disarmament and Mandates Sections was especially important.³⁶ Because of this assistance, the employees of the Political Section could influence conflicts and disputes outside their initial area of responsibility.

³⁶ "Appointments Committee January 1927-August 1928": 291-293. LONA. S956-265-1.

The Director of the section could entrust the sole responsibility of a certain dispute to specific high-ranking officials.³⁷ If an official was entrusted with the responsibility of a question, it gave him a lot of freedom to act as he thought beneficial and, therefore, a high degree of agency. At times when the Political Section had a lot of difficult work, it could be necessary to give responsibilities to officials that normally would not – because of their rank – be entrusted with these responsibilities.³⁸ This made it possible for the officials to expand their degree of agency, if they had the necessary competence to do so.

Harold Nicolson had the responsibility of handling the Vorarlberg question. The dispute concerned whether the region of Vorarlberg should be part of Austria or Switzerland. Whether Nicolson was given this responsibility, or if it was a responsibility that he unilaterally took, is unclear. The earliest document in the file related to this dispute, is a report sent by Nicolson to Eric Drummond on November 24, 1919. The first sentence in this report is “As will have been seen from the Press, this question is again exciting attention [...]”³⁹ This indicates that there was no previous concern over this issue within the League. None of the parties involved in the conflict asked the League’s assistance in resolving it.⁴⁰ It seems that Nicolson unilaterally took the responsibility of handling this dispute and, thereby, using his agency. However, he was dependent of the press to supply information, and the expectations of his superiors was that Nicolson acted when receiving information about a political conflict.

His report was based on information supplied to the Political Section by third party actors, such as the press.⁴¹ This was a restricting factor since Nicolson was limited to information supplied to him. He still chose which information to include in the report and sent it directly to Drummond. The fact that Mantoux did not oversee his actions demonstrates Nicolson’s high degree of autonomy. After Drummond received the report, he had to decide whether anything had to be done. Clearly, despite Nicolson’s agency, he had no decision-making ability.

³⁷ “Appointments Committee January 1932-December 1934”: 178. LONA. S957-266-2.

³⁸ “Appointments Committee January 1932-December 1934”: 28. LONA. S957-266-2.

³⁹ “The Vorarlberg Question - Mr. H. Nicolson (Report No. 35)”: 2. LONA. R563-11-2155-2188.

⁴⁰ “The Vorarlberg Question - Mr. H. Nicolson (Report No. 35)”: 2. LONA. R563-11-2155-2188.

⁴¹ “The Vorarlberg Question - Mr. H. Nicolson (Report No. 35)”: 2. LONA. R563-11-2155-2188.

Cecil von Renthe-Fink also acted as a political watchdog and studied a dispute that was not yet submitted to the League.⁴² The conflict he studied was the dispute between Poland and Lithuania in 1927 concerning Vilnius. The conflict was as a result of the war between Poland and Lithuania that formally ended in 1920. As in the case of Nicolson it is unclear whether Renthe-Fink studied this dispute on his own initiative. As the conflict about Vilnius was one that the Council had handled previously and was still interested in; the demarcation between own initiative and no initiative is not clear. There was no written order or message instructing him to study the dispute. He might have received signals or oral orders from the Secretary-General, the Council, his Director or a fourth party. Renthe-Fink had to act according to expectations from superiors and the adhere to the 'rules of the game' – he could not, of course, act completely freely. Despite not being able to choose which conflict to study, he still had a relatively high degree of agency and autonomy regarding his actions.

The report of Renthe-Fink differs from the report of Nicolson. Renthe-Fink included assessments and failed aspects of the conflict.⁴³ In these assessments were recommendations on which actions to take to successfully resolve the conflict. According to the formal regulations the reports of the Political Section were supposed to be an objective and neutral analysis of information. Renthe-Fink strengthened his influence on the outcome of the conflict by trying to expand his tasks and his area of responsibility. This shows his high degree of agency. Renthe-Fink did not send his report directly to Drummond, like Nicolson did. Instead, he sent it to Yotaro Sugimura.⁴⁴ A reason for this was that the structure of the Secretariat and the chain of information was firmer in 1927 than in 1919. This limited his agency and influence because Sugimura would then have to decide whether to pass it on to Drummond.

Some officials travelled to the countries in conflict to study it. One of them was Thanassis Aghnides. On the orders of Sugimura, Aghnides went to study the Hungarian-Romanian conflict at the end

⁴² "The question of Vilna - Mr. von Renthe-Fink, Political Section, describes the current situation": 4-6. LONA R602-11-19704-60654.

⁴³ "The question of Vilna - Mr. von Renthe-Fink, Political Section, describes the current situation": 4-6. LONA R602-11-19704-60654.

⁴⁴ "The question of Vilna - Mr. von Renthe-Fink, Political Section, describes the current situation": 4-6. LONA R602-11-19704-60654.

of 1927.⁴⁵ The conflict concerned agricultural land on the border between the two countries. Aghnides was not part of a Commission of Inquiry sent by the Council and his agency was limited by the fact that he acted on orders of Sugimura. The report made by Aghnides was given to Sugimura who made a few remarks before passing it on to Drummond. The Conflict was submitted to the Council and Drummond passed the report on to the Council for further actions.⁴⁶ Neither Aghnides, Sugimura nor Drummond could decide which actions to take, but Aghnides could influence the actions taken through the selection of information.

During his trip Aghnides conducted interviews with relevant persons,⁴⁷ which had two effects on his influence and agency. The first was that he had a better opportunity to get the information that he wanted. The second effect was that he could – consciously or subconsciously – affect the opinion of the interviewed persons. Since no transcriptions of his interviews exist, this is a mere hypothesis. He also had contact with the Hungarian and Romanian governments,⁴⁸ and participated actively in the negotiations with both governments.⁴⁹ The letters sent by Aghnides to the governments were approved by Drummond. Aghnides didn't have sole responsibility for the negotiations which restricted his influence and agency. He did, however, write and receive the letters which gave him a higher degree of influence and agency.

At times the officials also went on unofficial trips to study disputes. An official doing this was Jean Daniel de Montenach. He was in Upper Silesia in 1922. The result of the plebiscite in 1921 created new minorities. According to the Geneva Convention of 15 May 1922, minority schools were to be established to help the new minorities. The dispute in 1922 concerned the fact that some did not believe that this was done in a satisfactory way. It was not submitted to the Council for resolution.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ "Requests by the Roumanian and Hungarian Governments under Articles II of the Covenant and 239 of Treaty of Trianon - Memoranda by Mr. Aghnides.": 2-3. LONA R1834-1A-1730-1978.

⁴⁶ "Requests by the Roumanian and Hungarian Governments under Articles II of the Covenant and 239 of Treaty of Trianon - Memoranda by Mr. Aghnides.": 2-3. LONA R1834-1A-1730-1978.

⁴⁷ "Requests by the Roumanian and Hungarian Governments under Articles II of the Covenant and 239 of Treaty of Trianon - Memoranda by Mr. Aghnides.": 5 ff. LONA R1834-1A-1730-1978.

⁴⁸ "Requests by the Roumanian and Hungarian Governments under Articles II of the Covenant and 239 of Treaty of Trianon - Memoranda by Mr. Aghnides.": 2-3. LONA R1834-1A-1730-1978.

⁴⁹ "Requests by the Roumanian and Hungarian Governments under Articles II of the Covenant and 239 of Treaty of Trianon - Memoranda by Mr. Aghnides.": 5 ff. LONA R1834-1A-1730-1978.

⁵⁰ "Protection of Minorities in Upper Silesia": 15. LONA R1671-41-20675-24751.

Montenach was invited to come to Upper Silesia by Felix Calonder, president of the 'Mixed Commission for Upper Silesia' – who oversaw the implementation of the measures that were decided with the resolution of the conflict in 1921. Calonder wrote to Montenach personally, with hopes that it wouldn't be necessary to include Drummond to get an official from the Secretariat to Upper Silesia.⁵¹ Further, Albert Thomas said that Montenach could join him on an already planned trip.⁵² Drummond was eventually included in the process and believed that "[...] it would be a mistake for Monsieur de Montenach, as a Member of the Secretariat, to pay a visit to Upper Silesia at present time."⁵³ However, he couldn't decide what Montenach did as a private individual.⁵⁴

Montenach accepted the invitation of Calonder and Thomas and went to Upper Silesia despite the discontent of Drummond. Montenach emphasized that he left as a private individual. However, the goal was to obtain information which could benefit him in the discussions of this dispute. Mantoux confirmed Montenach's trip and approved the purpose.⁵⁵ Even though Montenach wasn't an official representative of the Secretariat when in Upper Silesia; he was still a member of the Political Section and, therefore, had some degree of authority. Montenach strengthened his agency. It happened at a time when the Political Section had much difficult work. This amplified Montenach's opportunity to expand his tasks and area of responsibility.

Montenach did not get to act as he saw best fitting. He believed it would be best to encourage the minorities to submit the conflict to the Council.⁵⁶ Drummond did not see this as a suitable solution to the conflict. Therefore, Montenach had to withdraw his recommendation.⁵⁷ Drummond had the final say in these cases, which restricted the agency of the officials of the Political Section in these situations.

⁵¹ "Protection of Minorities in Upper Silesia": 4-5. LONA R1671-41-20675-24751.

⁵² "Protection of Minorities in Upper Silesia": 2-3. LONA R1671-41-20675-24751.

⁵³ "Protection of Minorities in Upper Silesia": 7-8. LONA R1671-41-20675-24751.

⁵⁴ "Protection of Minorities in Upper Silesia": 7-8. LONA R1671-41-20675-24751.

⁵⁵ "Protection of Minorities in Upper Silesia": 18-19. LONA R1671-41-20675-24751.

⁵⁶ "Protection of Minorities in Upper Silesia": 2-3. LONA R1671-41-20675-24751.

⁵⁷ "Protection of Minorities in Upper Silesia": 7 & 18-19. LONA R1671-41-20675-24751.

Mantoux said in a meeting of the Appointments Committee on November 27, 1922, that Montenach had "[...] rendered very good service during the Upper Silesian negotiations [...]."⁵⁸ Because of this, Mantoux thought it would be fitting to promote him and give him more responsibility in the future.⁵⁹ This is an example of an official who permanently expanded his area of responsibility and his tasks by taking agency in times when the section was busy handling many conflicts. One might think that personal relations influenced the recommendation, however, the minutes from the meetings doesn't indicate this. The minutes show that the recommendation was made possible because of Montenach's competence.

This brief case study has shown that the employees of the Political Section were generally limited by the 'rules of the game' and expectations of their superiors when choosing which disputes to deal with. Further, they were limited by the geographic organisation of the section. The employees had, nonetheless, a high degree of agency relating to their actions when handling the disputes and due to the accumulated knowledge, they had of concrete situations. As the example of Montenach shows, employees could use their agency to significantly expand their area of responsibility and tasks.

Conclusion

I have shown that the Political Section was highly professionalised and that 61% of the first division employees had a background in diplomacy. This high level of professionalisation meant that it had the competence to handle political conflicts. Besides the many employees with a diplomatic background, the section had employees with other backgrounds. This expanded the section's area of expertise and made it better suited to handle different conflicts. A necessity because the section had to assist other sections in the Secretariat. This technical specialisation provided it with more influence because it was less open to political insecurities.

Aside its professionalisation the section had a high degree of national diversity among the first division employees. The high national diversity made it better suited to handle conflicts from many areas of the world. The employees handled communications with their own government or

⁵⁸ "Appointments Committee January 1922-August 1923": 275. LONA S954-263-1.

⁵⁹ "Appointments Committee January 1922-August 1923": 275. LONA S954-263-1.

governments geographically close to their home country. They also handled the disputes happening in the geographical area from where they came. Despite the section's high national diversity, it was highly Eurocentric. The article has shown how the general traits of the section were started under the first Director. They were since expanded, especially the national diversity grew during the Political Section's life span.

It has been shown which functions the section were thought to have and how it should perform its work. The section would receive information from the governments and the press of the member states. Further, it was to receive information from other sections of the Secretariat. After having received the information, the Political Section should compile a report which provided an objective and neutral analysis of the received information and give it to the Secretary-General and/or the Council or the Assembly. Even though the tasks of the section were clear, it had freedom in the way it solved these tasks.

The agency of the employees was restricted in terms of which dispute they wanted to study. Renthe-Fink and Nicolson were restricted by the fact that third parties had to supply the information. Despite not receiving orders to handle the conflicts, refusing to study a clear political conflict would have been career suicide. This enhances the limitation of their own initiative. Aghnides acted on orders of Sugimura. For Montenach the situation was more complex. He needed the invites from Calonder and Thomas. However, the fact that he was able to leave despite the discontent of Drummond shows a high degree of agency.

The employees had a high degree of agency in relation to their actions. They chose the information included in the report. Renthe-Fink shows a high degree of agency making recommendations on how to handle the conflict, thereby expanding his tasks and influence. Aghnides also had a high degree of agency; he could choose who to talk with. This influenced which information he would collect and was amplified by the fact that he was on a mission, which made his actions more independent. Montenach was restricted by the fact that Drummond had to accept his recommendations, which he didn't. Despite this Montenach had a high degree of agency. He travelled outside of the Secretariat to do his study of the dispute which gave him more freedom. Montenach is an example of how the employees could permanently expand their area of

responsibility and tasks by taking agency at a time when the section was busy. A common thing for all the employees was that they were only able to expand their degree of agency because they had the competence to do so.

Their influence on the outcome of conflicts were restricted by the fact that they did not have decision-making abilities. They could influence the outcome by selecting information. This allowed them to present any given conflict in a specific way which either gave incentives to do something or gave incentives to do nothing. As such, the ability to control information became one of the most, if not the most, important ability of the employees of the Political Section.

This analysis of the Political Section tells the story of how the League sought to solve diplomatic conflicts and how the individual employees could influence this process. This can be used to understand how diplomatic relations functioned in the Interwar Period. Gram-Skjoldager and Ikonomou (2020) traced the idea of the international civil servant from the League to the United Nations. Therefore, this study can also help us understand how diplomatic relations works in the present. Further, this analysis has shown the benefits of using a prosopographical social network analysis. Applying this actor-based approach have shown the *modus operandi* of the Section. The same approach can be applied to other areas, not only within the area of political history but in historical studies in general. The actor-based approach has not been missing from history but taking a prosopographical approach have not been explored to the fullest, and further studies with this approach will prove beneficial to the study of the League of Nations, interwar relations and our understanding of the international world both past and present.



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