

The League of Nations Secretariat as a Site of Political Imagination

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Carl Schmitt, that most splenetic anti-liberal thinker, once defined the liberal as the person who, faced with the question “Christ or Barabbas,” “answers with a motion to adjourn the meeting or set up an investigative committee.”¹ Schmitt thought this a devastating critique. Since politics, for him, was war by other means, the liberal’s tendency to reach for the datebook not the dagger was a sign of cowardice. But I think Schmitt’s definition captures an excellent quality, reminding me of just why I like liberals so much. When conviction politicians are baying in our faces, shouting “Christ or Barabbas,” “choose,” “choose”, why wouldn’t we welcome a few calm souls saying, “excellent question – perhaps we could take it up next Thursday at 4?”

The appeal of this response stands out more starkly if we recall that, for Schmitt, political choices are situational, not normative or moral, dictated not by universal values but by geopolitical or historical accident: this person’s Christ will be that person’s Barabbas. But if that’s the case – although I don’t think we should admit for a moment it is – what could be more sensible than to form the (preferably ponderous, voluble and dilatory) committee? Anyone who has been in politics or administration – even, as I was, in university administration – when the man with the leader fetish lands, understands that bureaucratic response. One may want just to slow things down, so that passions may cool, new alliances form, new distractions emerge. But there is an ethics behind it as well: the conviction that a politics rooted in evidence, process,

precedent and persuasion will yield better results than one grounded in charisma or force. It isn't that bureaucracy evacuates power, but it does require that power explain itself, and by doing so often gentles it. And for those on the receiving end of power, that gentleness can matter a lot.

I am going to speak today about the institution that, more than any other in the years between the wars, managed tense and often deeply felt international conflicts by forming a committee. I speak, of course, of the League of Nations. Schmitt's description captures perfectly the League at work. Faced with the question of Christ or Barabbas – or, let's say, Poland or Lithuania in Vilna, Iraq or Turkey in Mosul – it adjourned the meeting and formed a committee. Sometimes that move was only a play for time, even for time for power to put on its mask and find its words. But sometimes it was much more than that – an effort to create a pause, in which the committee could do the work of diplomacy, negotiating on behalf of some understood but elusive interest – “the Covenant,” “international peace” – some solution just barely acceptable to the shouting protagonists. Or sometimes, when those operating in the pause were clever and kept their heads – they could dissipate the conflict through delay or displace it to another realm. Schmitt loathed the League not only because it enshrined, as he saw it, the German subjection wrought by the “diktat” of Versailles, but also for this flexible and alchemical capacity, this ability to talk the edges off political antagonisms or displace them.

My subjects today are the men and women who I think of as the actors in the pause: the permanent officials of the Secretariat of the League of Nations. These were the men, and occasionally women, whose job it was – when a crisis happened and that crisis was referred to the League – to advise on the form that League inquiry could take, negotiate its charge, compile

the dossiers of possible experts or politicians to appoint, gather the material those members might see, guide their discussions, draft their reports, and – if the Council could be persuaded that something actually ought to be done – work out an action plan and set in motion the delicate negotiations to bring it about. The Secretariat was to do this, moreover, while also carrying out the duties laid on the League by specific articles of the Covenant and the Treaty of Versailles – to oversee the minorities and mandates regimes, for example, or administer Danzig, or, more vaguely, promote international cooperation on everything from public health to transit to communications to child welfare to the traffic in drugs and women. And it was to do that with a very small staff. At its height, the Secretariat counted just over 700 souls, compared to 44,000 employed today by the United Nations Secretariat or 33,000 employed by the European Commission.

For quite a while we knew surprisingly little about this very small but I would argue transformative institution. Partly this was because we didn't much care. The only full study of the Secretariat is still that written during the Second World War in preparation for the establishment of the United Nations.² After all, since the League quote unquote "failed," why look too hard at those complicit in this debacle? Most of our great research resources are national anyway, and see historical actors when they cross the national stage. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography doesn't just omit many who made their careers at the League, it also skates over the Geneva years of those included. The entry on Drummond is perceptive, if short, but the entry on Sir Arthur Salter, gives all of two sentences to his decade running the Economic and Financial Organization, and his second-in-command Arthur Loveday has no entry at all. That on Rachel Crowdy, the League's highest-ranking woman, tells us only that she

“considered a wide range of social problems” during her ten years heading the social section.

We are told that Konni Zilliacus worked for the Information Section, but not that he did so from 1920 to 1938, and, on leaving, tried to expose Avenol for malfeasance.³

But if one reason for our ignorance is that we weren't much interested, the other reason is that these officials worked hard to elude our attention. They were canny enough to know that their authority grew as they disavowed it. Most thus insisted that they were only impartial tools of a political will that resided elsewhere – in the Covenant or possibly in public opinion, according to those that leaned left, or in the League Council or possibly the community of states, according to those that leaned right. When thanked for their competence or, worse, their creativity, they shrugged it off. “Does a man owe gratitude to his pen?” William Rappard, Director of the Mandates Section, replied in 1921, when thanked for having so clearly laid out – really determined – the decisions to be taken by the new Mandates Commission at their very first session. Drummond insisted on that performance of impartiality, even of near-invisibility, regularly warning his Directors not to express views on controversial subjects, to shift all credit for League successes to the Council, to do nothing that might bring the Secretariat into disrepute. Press leaks were always investigated to make sure they didn't originate with his staff (they never did), and charges that the Secretariat might be operating a politics of its own always firmly denied. Not until after the Second World War did Drummond admit that the Secretariat's work had always been intensely political – and by then, no-one much cared.

We care now, though – more than ever in our intensely networked but worryingly unstable world. As global hazards worsen, and states seem less able (and their populations less

willing) to address them, we've become more curious about the genealogy of international administration and control. Historians have gone back to the League's Economic and Financial Organization, its Health Organization, its Committee on Intellectual Cooperation; they now track the role played by Japanese, or French, or the Scandinavian officials in Geneva. There are even, finally, first attempts to come to grips with the League apparatus as a whole. I'm thinking here of the LONSEA database created by Madeleine Herren and her team at Heidelberg, which mapped a network of some 12,000 individuals active in international organizations between the wars and the study of the 3000 people who worked at some point at the Secretariat begun by researchers led by Karen Gram-Skoldager at Aarhus University.

I can't anticipate what that latter project will find. What I'd like to do today, though, is to suggest a few questions such scholars might take up, and point to a few places they might look for answers. For if Secretariat officials were very circumspect about what they said in public, they were politically astute and highly self-reflective people, thoughtful and deliberative about just what they were doing. Behind closed doors, and especially at the bi-weekly meetings of its high-ranking Directors, they often paused to reflect about just those questions that might preoccupy us today: questions of the limits of state sovereignty, of the place and authority of the international, and especially of the limits and legitimacy of their own role. The records of those meetings, together with one other underused source – the personnel files of the League, now open – are the foundation for this talk today.

I want to show how, in private discussions and still more through their practice, this first generation of international officials worked to constitute and legitimize “the international” as a

distinct realm of political action and political work, and how they imaginatively grappled with the questions of authority and legitimacy their often innovative work raised. Secretariat officials, I would argue, understood themselves to be operating at once within and beyond the state system; they thus knew that – so long as both sovereignty and democratic accountability rested with the nation-state – their very existence begged legitimation. The second half of this talk will then get to brass tacks, examining first the range of opinion among officials about the realm and role of “the international”; second, how they sought through innovation and practice to expand and justify that realm; but also, third, how fragile their structure, and still more their own legitimacy truly was. If we delve into the life of the Secretariat, I would argue, we can see that it was neither simply the tool of the League’s leading states, nor the disciplined troops of a single internationalist vision, but rather the arena within which a set of consequential arguments about the scope, practice and legitimacy of internationalism were fought out. That it could play this role, however, was contingent on a few key decisions made at the outset. Let me make a brief detour, then, back to 1919, to note the importance of some surprisingly bold decisions made by the first Secretary-General, Sir Eric Drummond.

Drummond’s central place in this story is almost accidental. He had not been the first choice of Wilson, Clemenceau and Lloyd George for the post of Secretary-General. Instead, after first sounding out popular statesmen like Greece’s Eleftherios Venizelos and Czechoslovakia’s Tomas Masaryk, the peacemakers turned to the man who had imposed order on their chaotic proceedings – Sir Maurice Hankey, British Cabinet Secretary, and then Secretary to the Peace Conference itself. Hankey thought about it, but when it began to look as if the United States might not even join, he turned the post down. It would just be a talk-shop, he

thought, and he'd rather be Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defense, which was sort of the command center for the British Empire, which Hankey – like most British politicians – tended to equate with the command center of the world.

Now, it's fair to say that if the United States had joined, or even if Hankey had agreed to become Secretary General, the League would have been a very different organization. For Hankey, before he turned the job down, sketched out a plan for its administrative structure. He envisaged a Secretariat divided into discrete national bureaus – a British section, a French section, an American section, an Italian section, a Japanese section, in time a German section – each staffed by civil servants seconded from the member state. Yes, there would be a permanent staff of translators and typists and clerks, but they would provide only technical support for what was essentially a standing conference of the world's great powers. In Hankey's model, then, “the international” was reduced to a space of transaction, in which only those directly representing their nation-state, and disproportionately those representing the great powers, can speak.

But Drummond, quite remarkably, broke with that great-power-centered structure. The Secretariat would be organized by function and not by nation, with sections supporting each area of work – legal, political, disarmament, press, mandates, health, economics, and others – entrusted to the League by the Covenant. The principle that authority flowed from a source beyond the nation-state thus was hard-wired into the League from the start – although Drummond cautiously built up his sections as the Council gave them things to do; some, notably the Social Section, for which he cared nothing, were always tiny. But those sections, he had

already decided, would be staffed, not by civil servants seconded from national bureaucracies but by an international civil service created de novo, one open – at the insistence of the international women’s organizations – to women as well as men. Those few hundreds of officials would live permanently together in Geneva, a bourgeois town startled to find itself hosting the closest thing to a world government.

It’s hard to overstate how important this decision to found an international secretariat and to locate it in Geneva truly was. The League would have a Council dominated by the great powers, for which prime ministers and foreign ministers would gather three or four times a year. It would have an Assembly, a target for manifold lobbies and a stage for politicians, convening annually in Geneva. Both those League bodies – its Parliament and Cabinet, if you will – thus met only episodically, and were composed of national actors who usually knew little about the League, or the issues it dealt with, at all. Today, states appoint missions or Permanent Representatives to the United Nations, but few did so to the League; in other words, nation states hardly had a grip on the institution at all. Revealingly, Drummond and his senior staff resisted states’ proposals to set up offices, a move they thought would turn Geneva into a center of political intrigue and vitiate the work of the Secretariat.⁴ Drummond’s choices not only established “the international” as an interest in and of itself, with an agenda set not by individual states but by the Covenant; they also turned the Secretariat, not the Council (as Hankey would have wished), into its heart. This is where initiative and dynamism lay.

But Drummond did more than set the structure of the Secretariat. He also appointed the men – and one woman – who were its nucleus. Each section would be headed by a Director – or,

in the case of the smaller sections, by a Chef de Section. Filling those first posts in 1919, Drummond turned to men who had proved their worth at the Peace Conference – notably Paul Mantoux, interpreter for Georges Clemenceau, who was named to head the Political Section, Pierre Comert, the prominent French journalist to head the Information Section, and George Louis Beer, Wilson’s Colonial Advisor, to run Mandates – although he was replaced by Rappard when the US failed to join. Still more readily to hand, though, were those men who had run the wartime Inter-Allied Organizations – shipping, wheat. This was where Drummond found his close collaborator and economics czar Arthur Salter, the talented Norwegian Erik Colban, who took on the touchy and difficult job of running the minorities regime, and most importantly his French Deputy Secretary-General Jean Monnet, whose “functionalist” understanding of the way international accord might be fostered by technical collaboration dates from this wartime work.

Those men often brought their capable English secretaries to Geneva with them when they moved from London in 1920 – a gift that won the Secretariat a deserved reputation for faultless technical and clerical work and opened opportunities to a few women who had the grit and persistence to demand them. While most male members of the League’s several hundred strong professional or “First Division” staff were hired into their jobs directly, most of the some two dozen women who eventually made it into that exclusive club climbed, through sheer perseverance, out of the clerical ranks. In a familiar pattern, women proved their worth in jobs below their talents, running complex offices while still classed as clerks. Nancy Williams, with her First in Classics from University College Wales, for example, ran the League’s entire Personnel side as a second division clerk, though when she was replaced by a man, that position was bumped up to “Director” level – that is, to the League’s highest First Division rank. These

gender patterns are not my main focus here, but they cry out for investigation. And yet, even if it did not treat women fairly, much less equally, many observers found the Secretariat shockingly and visibly sexually integrated: the mixed-sex culture of work that we live with today, along with all its attendant problems – harassment of the secretaries, affairs among the staff, Crowdy and Noel-Baker, Zilliacus and Mary McGeachy – are found here. Does anyone study how placing women and men together in high stress jobs, changes what organizations do and, more critically, want to do? We should.

And Drummond made one higher-ranking female appointment. Pressure from women's organizations led him to look for a woman to head the social section, and when he couldn't find the Scandinavian he wanted, to name Rachel Crowdy, who had run Britain's massive volunteer nursing administration during the war. Crowdy, without quite gaining Drummond's consent, then sounded out the charismatic Polish Jewish epidemiologist Ludwig Rajchman about running the Health Section – a job she thought should be expeditiously filled, given the cholera and typhus epidemics raging through Eastern Europe. Rajchman was very busy – already setting up sanitary cordons in the East, and founding a hospital with Rockefeller money in Poland – but promptly accepted, at a salary some of his peers thought excessive for a Pole. There were other appointments too – of the Italian Bernardo Attolico to run the internal services, the Dutchman Joost van Hamel to the Legal section, another Frenchman, Robert Haas, at Communications and Transit, the Japanese intellectual Inazo Nitobe to oversee international bureaux.

Beginning that summer of 1919, and for the next ten years, the League's Directors met roughly 30 times a year. The meeting functioned as a kitchen cabinet, Drummond using it to

share information, take soundings, hear protests, and occasionally – when he thought it necessary – rein his lieutenants in. They did not take decisions, for Drummond held absolutely authority, although he wisely let his section heads run their own ships. Around 1929 those meetings became less substantive and also less frequent, with some twenty annually from 1929 to 1932. This was not because the League was less active; if anything it was more. These were the fractious years of Germany's membership, when the Secretariat ran conferences aimed at mitigating the worsening economic situation and heightening geopolitical tensions: the World Monetary and Economic Conference, the Disarmament Conference, the Lytton inquiry into the Manchurian crisis. The great cartoonists of the League, Alois Derso and Emery Kelen captured this whirlwind of activity in 1931 when they portrayed Albert Thomas of the International Labour Organization and Eric Drummond of the League walking barefoot across the red sea, the waves of unemployment, industrial crisis and armaments parting to let them pass.

Except actually the waves crashed over them. The economic and disarmament sections' advice was rarely heeded; states opted for protection and later, rearmament. True, some League initiatives continued to thrive, but they did so by floating free of their Genevan moorings, finding other sources of legitimacy or support. After Germany's withdrawal and still more after the Ethiopian crisis, not to mention Joseph Avenol's disastrous appointment, the political work on which Drummond laid such stress fell into decline. The Directors' meeting minutes accurately track that crisis. Through 1932, these key heads still met bi-weekly, with Drummond almost always there. From 1933, they met at most monthly and usually much less often, and Avenol was rarely present. Those meetings did little more than work out Council or Assembly agendas; minutes reveal no substantive discussion. By that point most of the great figures of the League –

Salter, Colban, Crowdy – were gone, and those that hung on, like Rajchman, were basically running separate fiefdoms sustained by independent sources of funds. There’s a declensionist narrative here, then, inevitably so, but also a story, worth recovering, of an effort to establish “the international” as an independent arena for legitimate political action. To get at that, let me turn to my three questions. First, how did these men conceive of the international system, and of their place within it? What on earth did they think they were doing?

During and after the Second World War, that question would be placed within the political science debate between “realism” and “idealism,” with the League’s failure ascribed to its idealist flaws – although, in that literature, it also gets the odd approving nod as the birthplace of Mitranian “functionalism”. Now, those paradigms may have had their uses – we need frameworks after all, even wrong ones – but as a number of intellectual historians have pointed out, they cannot be read back into the interwar years.⁵ Yes of course we can ascribe political leanings to different officials: Drummond and Colban, with their deference to national interests, look like realists, Rappard, with his appeals to public opinion, like an idealist, Monnet, zeroing in on economic planning, like a functionalist – and so on. But these labels don’t get us very far, for all of these men still saw themselves as international and not national officials, answerable to no national interest. Whether their job be reconciling state interests, or building up “functional” arenas of collaboration, that they were to defend their international authority was not up for discussion. Those seemingly rival understandings of internationalism’s task, moreover, were posited not as conflicting but as complementary: this is a case not of “either-or” but of “both-and”. The so-called “technical” work of the League – its work for famine relief, say, or economic stabilization – was not thought an alternative to political conciliation, but symbiotic

with it, with Directors often noting that Rajchman's efforts to combat cholera and famine in Eastern Europe in particular were materially changing those populations' attitudes towards the League.⁶ And through this work, as Patricia Clavin has argued, a new and more sophisticated definition of "security" emerged, one cast in economic and social – not strictly military – terms.

Of course, there were still struggles over which programs or needs claimed priority, which voices be heard. In May 1921, Drummond's deputy, the energetic and brilliant young Frenchman Jean Monnet [SLIDE], pressed the Secretariat to take up more transnational problems. In the League, he said, the world finally had a body able to carry out conventions and implement agreements – capacities that should be seized and not let atrophy. Drummond and even the enthusiast Rappard demurred: the main work of the League was political conciliation, not technical cooperation, however worthy.⁷ Monnet never quite said whether he left the Secretariat in late 1922 because he disagreed with Drummond's priorities, but his explicit reason for going – because he had to save the family wine business – doesn't exactly convince. But the "technical" work proceeded anyway, and in any case those who disagreed with Monnet about its primacy agreed with him about the need for more initiative. In April 1921 the Dutchman Joost Van Hamel, head of the Legal Section, warned his colleagues that the great powers were growing accustomed to dealing with conflicts outside the machinery of the League; the Secretariat must therefore be pro-active, identifying key problems likely to trouble the international order and have plans ready-to-hand for dealing with each.⁸ This wasn't exactly Drummond's style, but he took the warning to heart, working with Foreign Office contacts in London to cut short Lloyd George's plan of setting up some new international body, using his authority with the Council to get the mandates system up and running, and, at Colban's

insistence and despite his horror of public speaking, doing regular European tours. By the early twenties, Britain and France were using the League to address tricky territorial conflicts, run conferences, and tackle humanitarian crises in Europe and outside it.⁹

When we look at the evolving practice of the Secretariat, then, it becomes clear that the League was not a “realist”, “idealist” or “functionalist” body but something different – a new space, where elements later identified with each of these positions were expressed but no single one won out. Instead, under Drummond’s cautious leadership, Secretariat officials worked to prove the value of this inter-state but also extra-state body. The danger to that project was not some wrong definition of internationalism, since – as Drummond understood – all were going to jog along together anyway; the danger was that states, seeing the League’s growing role, would work to “nationalize” it. For his whole time in Geneva, Drummond battled member states’ demands for more positions for their nationals, and, worse, their efforts to infiltrate the Secretariat and bend it to their ends.¹⁰ Quite early on, he had to accept that, if his officials would not leak internal deliberations to the press, many would keep their foreign ministries informed – and indeed, by 1930 he had to keep sensitive questions off the agenda even of the Directors’ meetings, having learned the hard way that “it was impossible to count on the proceedings of any meeting to be kept secret.”¹¹ But it was one thing to recognize that international officials would keep their foreign offices apprised of League discussions, quite another to accept that those officials had effectively turned into state representatives.

Worryingly, Joseph Avenol, identified as heir-apparent to Drummond after Monnet’s departure in 1922, never seemed to think this a problem: in fact, he seemed incapable of

understanding the principle of the Secretariat's independence at all. At he explained to the assembled Directors as early as 1923, in his view power to initiate activity rested entirely with member states, but since officials "represented" those separate states, if asked for help by the Council they could perhaps help reconcile national views.¹² The other directors were shocked, with Rappard retorting that, whatever the Secretariat's officially impersonal character, its influence was accepted, with it understood that "the Council's decisions were prepared by its servants – its intelligent and responsible servants – in the Secretariat."¹³ Nor did those servants consider themselves national representatives; Erik Colban, for example, worked to secure adherence to the minorities treaties on the League's behalf and not, of all things, as a Norwegian. Drummond himself endorsed that self-understanding a few meetings later: they were responsible to the League alone; outside interference in administrative matters could not be admitted. (Note here how artfully Drummond defended the Secretariat's autonomy with that anodyne word "administrative.") Avenol quieted down, but this altercation was a sign of problems to come. But League's officials had a few tricks up their sleeves too. As they sought to justify their own role, they invented new international practices and new bases of support – a process that is my second theme, to which we now turn.

So how did these officials carry out their international work? Some, notably Drummond, Mantoux and above all Colban acted like diplomats, mediating between states. Drummond regularly shuttled between London, Paris and later Berlin to settle German admission to the League or other tricky matters; Colban pioneered the diplomatic use of air travel to squeeze in as many visits as he could to capitals of the states that had signed minorities treaties.¹⁴ Such work made for pragmatism. Of course Colban sought to make sure his treaties were enforced, but he

defined success in terms of stability not justice: since German minorities and their belligerent kin-state patron could cause more trouble than, say, Ruthenians, he paid them more mind. Sharply aware that the League's authority depended on British and French buy-in, Drummond and Colban were also careful not to press any government harder than those powers would accept. When Rappard, now out of the Secretariat, wrote in 1925 that League officials worked behind the scenes to make sure the great powers' preferences prevailed, Drummond was quietly furious – but Rappard's assessment was not wrong. Indeed, Drummond's pragmatic deference to the great powers made him able to accept without flinching Germany's demand for equal status on entering the League in 1926 and (as Colban could not) the great-power cabals that followed. Were Geneva not able to adjust, Albert Dufour-Feronce, the new German Undersecretary warned in one Directors meeting in 1927, “some day ‘real’ politics would sweep the League away”¹⁵ – a veiled threat that greatly discomfited other Directors in the room.

Were there alternatives to such pragmatic adjustment? Some Directors thought there were. Rappard had left the Secretariat by the time Germany entered, but his behavior shows a quite different conception of the international official's role. The League was more than an “international letter-box”, Rappard wrote in 1927: it had a status of its own, a legal personality, derived from commitments made by member states through the Covenant. If Drummond, and to a degree Colban, thought it their job to prove their use within a nation-state system on whose sufferance the League survived, Rappard thought it his to make the great powers live up to their promises. He was willing to use persuasion and diplomacy to do that, but he also worked to mobilize those forces – the small states, the humanitarian organizations, liberal academics, the League press corps – with a real stake in an international order in which law, and not power.

While Drummond kept private lines open to Foreign Ministries, Rappard leaked material to American academics and lawyers, the Anti-Slavery Society and liberal internationalist friends – people he thought would rouse the “public opinion” and write the works that would keep the powers in check. Four years of skirmishing with Drummond told on him, and in 1924 he resigned – but only after he had established Mandates as one of the most independent of the Secretariat’s sections, perhaps the only one to pursue a policy sometimes hostile to the imperial powers’ explicit demands. Rappard did not do this because he was anti-imperialist but because he had a less statist idea of internationalism – a vision that was always embattled but not without effects.

So too had Ludwig Rajchman, the League Director who most effectively built up an alternative basis for international action. Of course, Rajchman was lucky in that states actually wanted what he had on offer: as he reported during the typhus epidemic in the early twenties, even the Bolsheviks and Poles would negotiate a sanitary convention when the alternative was millions of deaths. Rajchman only sometimes attended the Directors meetings, for he was often away from Geneva, setting up an epidemiological station in Singapore or running a rural health conference in the Balkans, nor did he entirely need the League’s support, for much of the cost of his work (and his section was one of the League’s largest), was met by the Rockefeller Foundation and other American bodies. Indeed, it was Rajchman who acted out David Mitrany’s argument before Mitrany made it, consciously using so-called “technical” work to try to ease geopolitical tensions. It was Rajchman who insisted on a development mission to China after the League had failed to force the Japanese to withdraw, Rajchman who mobilized scientists and experts behind League projects, and Rajchman’s whose health organization was still growing

when the rest of the League was in decline. He was not the only Director to understand the connection between so-called technical cooperation and peace. Salter's Economic and Financial Section too tried to find measures – a “customs truce”, talks on ways to equalize raw materials access – that might lessen the political harm done by the depression¹⁶; Haas's Communications Section reached across borders to craft agreements on river traffic or radio waves.

Rachel Crowdy too tried to entangle states rather than defer to them, playing well the worst hand any top League official was dealt. Crowdy, who had directed the work of thousands during the war, discovered on entering the Secretariat that she had a rank and salary well below that of her male peers, a tiny and mostly incompetent staff, no right to replace them, and a charge – that is, combatting sex and drug trafficking and promoting the welfare of women and children – that her superior cared little about and that states thought the League shouldn't take up at all. Like Rajchman, then, she looked beyond Geneva, to American allies but also to the international feminist and humanitarian organizations to which she had close ties. When her committees of national representatives proved dilatory or obstructive, Crowdy invented the post of “assessor” to plant knowledgeable experts, often women, on them.¹⁷ Avril de Saint-Croix of the International Council of Women, Eleanor Rathbone of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, Eglytne Jebb of Save the Children Fund, and a host of other hard-headed female reformers soon ran rings around the political appointees, forcing a more activist policy than would have otherwise been possible. Drummond looked askance at these innovations, warning Crowdy in her annual reviews that she was not to try to force “a forward policy...on Governments or Delegations which are opposed to it,”¹⁸ but Crowdy was not willing to take such criticisms lying down. In a remarkable response in 1929, she insisted that the most she could be accused of was

of not working to retard progress, which some of the national delegates clearly wished her to do. Drummond, she said bluntly, had never properly supported her.¹⁹

The League's top officials thus pursued a variety of strategies to enhance their international authority. Drummond and Colban sought to demonstrate the League's capacity in the hard work of international conciliation. Rappard stoked that liberal "public opinion" dear to Wilsonian ideals, while Salter pursued the forward-looking strategy of trying to build common political ground through economic integration. Rajchman, creatively, cultivated American foundations and networks of medical and health experts willing to support public health initiatives, while Crowdy sought to empower humanitarian and feminist bodies as well. We find the roots of today's foundation and NGO activism here, but we can also read their work as a challenge to those who saw the nation-state as the only source of political legitimacy. At a time when women in many states lacked political citizenship, Crowdy's decision to grant representation to international organizations for women and children implicitly identified these non-state interests as sources of political legitimacy in their own right.

Yet, only some of these strategies shielded officials from retribution. The position of "international official" was a new one; the principle that loyalty to the League trumped loyalty to country new as well. Officials who felt that loyalty most strongly thus risked antagonizing just those national bureaucracies out of whose ranks (in many cases) they had come, and to which ranks they might well return. Especially as national antagonisms worsened, how could they tread this line? How could the international official claim legitimacy, authority and, more bluntly, protection? This is my last question.

It's a familiar one, of course. The charge that the Brussels bureaucrat is unaccountable, floats free of the democratic institutions that oversee national officials, is common today and was heard then as well. Officials had a ready answer: they deferred to the democratic authority of the League itself, a body constituted through a Treaty binding all member states and thus a strong instrument under international law. Yet, as the varied behaviors I've sketched out today show, in practice officials located that democratic authority variably – Drummond, the diplomat, understood it to rest in the changeable views of the Council; Rappard, the law professor, at least partly in the Covenant text; Rajchman and Crowdy, more creatively but also dangerously, in the American foundations, humanitarian organizations committed to the cause their section was supposed to (but rarely had the resources to) advance. With their considerable non-governmental support and their flexible treatment even of membership – the Germans brought into health initiatives before League entry, the Japanese staying after formal exit, the Americans dropping in whenever they wanted – these officials were easy targets for national attacks.

And when that happened, the problem was that in formal terms they were not accountable to foundations or international feminist alliances: they were accountable to the Secretary-General, the head of their organization. If some states might be democracies, the Secretariat was not. When it came to the top positions, Drummond – and then Avenol – hired and fired. And for Drummond, remember, and still more for Avenol, the League – however international – was a League of governments.

Drummond, often portrayed as a cautious, mild-mannered man, could be ruthless in

driving home this point, as Crowdy learned. Drummond and Crowdy never quite got on: he suspected her, rightly, of enthusiasm; she chafed under his school-masterly reproaches for her section's faulty drafting. In 1928 she was told the next year would be her last, under rules that required top positions rotate after seven years – rules Drummond regularly waived for senior staff he found more valuable. Crowdy was shocked. As she told Drummond, she had accepted the Geneva post thinking it permanent and her last. The international women's and humanitarian organizations she represented so faithfully were outraged as well, deluging the League with telegrams and letters pleading to keep her on.²⁰ If anyone thought such tactics likely to soften Drummond's heart, though, they could not have been more wrong; in a sense, that flood flowed from a theory of international politics with which he strongly disagreed. In a conciliatory gesture, he extended Crowdy's contract for a single year, then replaced her (at higher rank and salary) with a Swedish diplomat not noted for enthusiasm.

If the non-governmental sides of the League enhanced its reputation, then, in Drummond's eyes they could not confer legitimacy. It's true that Rajchman's success and his near blank check from the Rockefeller foundation long shielded him right-wing governments' criticisms and anti-Semitic attempts at ouster. But by the thirties, and especially under Avenol, Secretariat officials were seeking safety not by creating such alternative bases of support, but by professing most ardently their own impartiality and their inability – as purely technical experts – to express views on policy at all. This had not quite been Drummond's view: as he had told the Directors, the Secretariat had a moral obligation to make the League more effective and more universal; it could not collude in policies hostile to the Covenant because that was what governments chose. But Drummond also knew that the need to avow impartiality meant that

officials – qua officials – could never mount that defense of the League on their own; if the governments no longer supported its core purposes, the organization’s raison-d’être was over. This was why, after later trying and failing to find some basis for Italo-Ethiopian “conciliation” as British Ambassador to Italy, he told the Foreign Office that – his 13 years at its helm notwithstanding – it would be better for the League to fall apart than to simply accept the Italian conquest.

The death throes were painful, though, especially for those Secretariat officials who still held what we might call Rappard’s line, and who urged Avenol – of all people – to rally them to defense of the Covenant. Take the very revealing case of Konni Zilliacus’s resignation. Zilliacus worked for the Information Section for almost two decades. His obvious intelligence, cosmopolitan background and linguistic virtuosity made him very valuable, but he never pretended to be impartial; most Secretariat members likely knew that “Vigilantes” and a few other pseudonymous authors writing columns sharply critical of Anglo-French and League inaction against fascism was none other than their own K. Zilliacus. But by August 1938 Zilliacus had concluded, as he explained to Avenol in a closely argued five-page letter of resignation, that he could not serve a Secretariat no longer loyal to League principles.

He was resigning, he wrote, because he disagreed with “what has become the official doctrine or political principle of the Secretariat.” For years, the principle governing the Secretariat’s work had been clear. The Secretariat was to do its work – collect data, offer advice, draft reports and assure publicity – “on the basis of the Covenant”. That obligation was doubly important when governments were themselves at odds, for if those governments must ultimately

take decisions, “the Secretariat had the duty of preparing those decisions on lines compatible with the obligations of the Covenant.” Since 1933, that task had become more difficult – but instead of holding loyally to that doctrine, the Secretariat appeared to have decided “that we have no official doctrine”...“because we are a purely administrative body with no political responsibilities.” That, Zilliagus said bluntly, was incorrect. The Secretariat was the servant of the League, which was “not merely a congeries of governments,” but a League of Nations bound by specific treaty obligations through the Covenant. “We owe loyalty to those obligations and to the idea behind them as much as we do to the governments. We must be idealists as well as realists, or we cease to be servants of the League and become mere parasites on the national diplomacies.”²¹

I do not know how Zilliagus’s attack on “realism,” which absorbs his next two pages, fits within the history of that concept, although that seems a subject worth investigating. What I want to point out is that Avenol responded in a way that entirely vindicated Zilliagus’s analysis – but that, by that very fact, gave Avenol the upper hand. Given the views expressed, Avenol replied, it was in the Secretariat’s interests that Zilliagus leave – but he could nevertheless not accept his letter. It was impertinent and offensive, studded with erroneous views on the Secretariat and gratuitous political remarks; Avenol would accept only a letter of resignation in the proper form. Zilliagus, in other words, must perform by letter an acceptance of the depoliticized definition of the Secretariat to which he was objecting – just the sort of requirement beloved of the bureaucratic tyrant in any regime. Zilliagus refused; Avenol referred the question to an internal disciplinary committee; and in the end, unsurprisingly, the Secretary-General got what he wanted – a two-line letter of resignation that he was happy to accept, effective

immediately. Probably unaware that the Foreign Office had been consulted every step of the way, Zilliacus took his criticisms off to Britain, just in time for the public euphoria that greeted Chamberlain's capitulation at Munich. Zilliacus's personnel file remained at the Palais des Nations, though, for me to open 75 years later.²²

In recovering this episode I am not arguing that Zilliacus was right about what the Secretariat "was". Instead, it was the arena in which this argument between what he called idealism and realism happened. I've argued that that argument might be better seen as one over the definition and scope of "the international," and of the authority of the international official within it. I've also suggested that this was an argument waged less by words than through practice, as this first generation of bureaucrats worked out methods and styles that would prove to have legs. Yet I hope you've taken away as well that the League Secretariat was not simply the precursor to the United Nations, not least because it was – if much smaller – more autonomous, internationalist and unconstrained. The decisions made in San Francisco – to site the United Nations in New York, to have permanent government missions there, to bypass great-power conflict through the veto – were deliberate attempts to force the great powers to "own" the institution and deliberate breaks from League practice. In Geneva, by contrast, governments were underprepared and often helpless, leaving a space open into which Secretariat officials walked. We can capture their self-understanding and impact only if we too walk out of our national archives to see "international relations as viewed from Geneva" – to quote the title of one of Rappard's books. It seems to me a good time to do this, not least because we may be embarking on another period in which international officials might be called on or condemned to lead more than ordinarily consequential lives.

¹ Schmitt, Political Theology (1922), translated and quoted in Ellen Kennedy, “Introduction: Carl Schmitt’s *Parliamentarismus* in its Historical Context,” in Schmitt, Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy (1985), p. xvi.

² James Barros, Office without Power: Secretary-General Sir Eric Drummond, 1919-1933 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); James Barros, Betrayal From Within: Joseph Avenol, Secretary-General of the League of Nations, 1933-1940 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969); Egon F. Ranshofen-Wertheimer, The International Secretariat: A Great Experiment in International Administration (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1945).

³ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, entries of Drummond, Salter, Noel-Baker, Crowdy, Zilliacus.

⁴ Directors Meeting Minutes (henceforth DMM), 19 Mar. 1924. These comprise the final 4 reels of the 555-reel League of Nations Documents 1919-1946 microfilm collection.

⁵ For that revisionist scholarship, see esp. David Long and Peter Wilson, eds., Thinkers of the Twenty Years’ Crisis: Inter-war Idealism Reassessed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); also David Long and Brian C. Schmidt, Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Lucian M. Ashworth, Creating International Studies: Angell, Mitrany and the Liberal Tradition (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

⁶ DMM, 12 June 1920, 28 Dec. 1921, 5 Apr. 1922.

⁷ DMM, 10 and 18 May 1921.

⁸ DMM, 21/10/19, Van Hamel to SG, 20 April 1921.

⁹ DMM, 3 Aug. 1921, 3 May 1922, 21 June 1922.

¹⁰ For Drummond chastising officials for this view, see DMM, 5 Dec. 1923,

¹¹ DMM, 11 June 1930.

¹² DMM, 28 Feb. 1923.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Note DMM, 1 Sept. 1920.

¹⁵ DMM, 22 June 1927.

¹⁶ DMM, 12 Feb. 1930.

¹⁷ DMM, 8 July 1921.

¹⁸ League archives, personnel file of Rachel Crowdy, certificate as to grant of annual increment, 25 August, 1925; see also certificate comments in 18 Aug. 1927 and 29 June 1929.

¹⁹ Ibid., Crowdy to Drummond, 26 July 1929.

²⁰ Ibid. telegrams and letters from international women’s and social organizations, most between Nov. 1928 and Feb. 1929.

²¹ League archives, personnel file of Konni Zilliacus, Zilliacus to Avenol, 9 Aug. 1938.

²² For which, see Zilliacus’s personnel file. Zilliacus’s resignation took effect on 15 Oct. 1938.