‘The League Committee of Intellectual Cooperation [...] has never attracted much sympathy in Great Britain’: Britain and the League of Nations in the Interwar Period.

Tomás Irish, Swansea University, United Kingdom

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‘The League Committee of Intellectual Cooperation, or CIC, has never attracted much sympathy in Great Britain. The name has about it something priggish, something that sounds to our prejudiced ears "Latin and not Anglo-Saxon." It rouses, until it can explain itself, all the Englishman’s instinctive mistrust of abstract ideas.’ These were the words of Gilbert Murray, the chair of the CIC, writing to the *Times* in 1931. Murray’s remark is an important starting point in order to understand Britain’s interaction with the League’s bodies on intellectual co-operation, namely the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) and the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC).

Britain’s relationship with the idea of ‘intellectual cooperation’ was defined by a pronounced public scepticism in the 1920s and 1930s. There were two major reasons for this. First, the discourse surrounding the idea of ‘intellectual cooperation’ in Britain highlighted a wider tension about the role of the intellectual in British society and the nature of British intellectuals more generally, where the term ‘intellectual’ was often deployed in a negative and pejorative sense, where anti-intellectualism was prominent in public discourse and where ‘denialism’ was part of English national identity. Second, Britain’s relationship with intellectual cooperation was illustrative of a wider disinclination in British political and cultural life to ‘buy into’ a project that presupposed a degree of transnational cultural coherence in lieu of pre-existing imperial organisations and connections.

There are three ways through which Britain’s interactions with intellectual cooperation can be measured: through an analysis of British attitudes towards the idea of ‘the intellectual’, through public discussions of the concept of ‘intellectual cooperation’, and through a brief exploration of the activities of the British National Committee on Intellectual Cooperation.

It is widely accepted that anti-intellectualism, and the idea that Britain has no intellectuals, is part of British – or, more specifically, English national identity. This has been argued by scholars such as Stefan Collini and T.W. Heyck. These ideas emerged in the 19th century and were usually framed versus other nations, especially France; for example, national qualities were often contrasted: England valued qualities such as pragmatism, empiricism and understatedness versus continental/French qualities of abstract rationalism, rhetoric and exaggeration. Often, to be an intellectual was portrayed in a negative light *because* the term was seen as one that emanated from continental Europe.

In his 1928 work *Learning and Leadership*, Alfred Zimmern wrote that ‘Englishmen delight, indeed, in proclaiming their distrust of the things of the mind and in exhibiting an artificial contrast, drawn to their own sardonic taste, between intellect and character. One of their traditional pleasures, fit almost to be ranked as a national sport, is to fling darts of good natured irony against the lover of ideas.’ In 1930 an editorial in the *Yorkshire Post* argued that ‘a Frenchman or a German is flattered by being called "intellectual" while a true Englishman regards this epithet with a particular uneasiness, if not as a veiled insult.’ Intellectual qualities could only be tolerated when it was concealed by something else, such as light heartedness, or when mingled with ‘other qualities more traditionally British.’

This more general scepticism about the figure of the intellectual framed British popular attitudes towards intellectual co-operation. This can be seen in the many newspaper stories from the 1920s and 1930s that identified the term 'intellectual co-operation' for particular scorn. Newspapers would accuse the ICIC of having a 'somewhat cumbrous title' a 'name abhorrent to English ears', of having an 'appalling name!', an 'unattractive name!, being 'clumsily termed', and having a 'terrifying name' that 'makes the average man fight shy of it.' For British supporters of the League and especially those who were keen to promote its involvement in cultural and educational initiatives, this recoil at the term 'intellectual co-operation' was a source of continued vexation. Gilbert Murray frequently sought to defend the ICIC in public debates in Britain, but also lamented that the title did not translate to English as effectively as it did in other languages. In a broadcast on the BBC in 1930, he noted that the term 'intellectual cooperation' sounded 'absurd' in English but was 'all right in French or Italian.' Where publications did engage seriously with intellectual cooperation, they often remarked that British representatives stood out negatively when contrasted against their more erudite colleagues from continental Europe and beyond, emphasising British difference all the while.

A final means of exploring British attitudes towards intellectual cooperation can be seen through the experiences of the British national committee. The ICIC encouraged nations to set up national committees on intellectual cooperation to disseminate its work and to provide a framework to encourage further international cooperation. By 1924, these existed in eighteen countries. The British national committee was not set up until 1928. Even once established, the British national committee was not an especially active body; when the British Council was established in 1934, newspapers noted that it would be performing much the same role as the League's national committee ought to. By that stage, H.R. Cummings, who worked for the British League of Nations Union, wrote that 'no one ever hears anything' of the British national committee. It had, however, been prominent in supporting the International Studies Conference that took place in London in 1935 as well as initiatives relating to moral disarmament. As late as 1938, Gilbert Murray was criticizing the limited support of the British government for intellectual cooperation, writing in the *Times* that 'I can hardly believe that it can be permanently cold-shouldered simply on the ground that the British people take no stock in mere moral and intellectual values.'

It was not the case that Britain was uniformly reluctant to engage with the intellectual cooperation agenda. In April 1930, Gwylim Davies – a regular visitor to Geneva who attended Assembly discussions of intellectual cooperation - wrote of his dissatisfaction at how little was known of Wales in Europe, meaning that from the European point of view 'lies, culturally, almost in outer darkness.' Davies was unhappy that Wales had no representation on the British national committee of Intellectual Cooperation, a decision which was attributed to the fact that all members were nominated by national learned societies. For Davies and his Welsh colleagues, intellectual cooperation could be a means to promote a greater sense of national difference.

The discourse surrounding intellectual cooperation in interwar Britain thus reveals much about how imperial and national identity were constructed. British reluctance to enthusiastically embrace intellectual cooperation must be understood in the context of a wider antipathy towards the figure of the intellectual. While figures like Murray sought to fight against these conceptions in the 1930s, the case of the British national committee suggests that intellectual cooperation was viewed with much scepticism in interwar Britain.