

Mobilising international public opinion: Moral disarmament as the public diplomacy of the League of Nations

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The League will never be a great success until there is formed as its main support a powerful international public opinion (Smuts 1918)

As part of their attempt to create stability after the First World War, the liberal internationalists drafting the League of Nations' Covenant wanted to mobilise the 'moral force' of the international public. They argued that, if educated and informed properly, the rational, war-averse public would understand the importance of a peaceful world order based on international cooperation and hold their governments accountable (Cohrs 2006, 30-35; Wertheim, 2019). Mobilising the public was therefore one of the major tasks lined up for the League. In my work, based on the research I have done for my thesis, I show that both the League's International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) and the Information Section (IS) became important actors in this process. While promoting what became known as 'moral disarmament', Secretariat officials did not only try to encourage international cooperation, but also made clear that a stable world order would only be achieved with the League managing international relations in the right direction.

While the concept of moral disarmament fell under the activities of the ICIC, there was a clear overlap with the work of the IS. Secretariat officials saw journalists, for instance, as important actors in achieving moral disarmament. Historian Heidi Tworek describes how the Secretariat initiated discussions on how the press could contribute to the achievement of a stable world order. In preparation of a conference of press experts organised in 1933, the League called for proposals on how to stop the 'spread of false information which may threaten to disturb the peace or the good understanding between nations' (Tworek 2010, 24) Similarly, David Goodman discusses how in the later 1930s attempts were made to create a 'Convention on Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace' in order to prohibit the broadcasting of 'hostile speech and false claims' (Goodman 2020, 165). In my research I show that, apart from pushing for protocols and regulation, League officials also conducted an active lobby for the international organisation. IS officials stayed in close contact with individuals they considered opinion-shapers. They travelled around the world to lecture about the League and created information offices in some member states. In the reports they wrote, the officials captured the state of public opinion on the League and described what they did to improve it. In my thesis I argue that their efforts and the cooperation with the League of Nations' societies, set up by civil society actors, can be considered as the public diplomacy of the League.

To demonstrate the practical efforts of the ICIC and IS in the field of moral disarmament I will focus on their related activities in educational programs. Education was one of the focus points of the ICIC. Historians as Ken Osborne have shown how the committee urged national governments to revise textbooks in order to create a more 'international mind' (Osborne 2016). The ICIC's executive organ, the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC) in Paris facilitated university exchanges by collecting and publishing all available exchange programs and funding opportunities (IIIC 1929). The ICIC encouraged travelling and saw it as part of the road to moral disarmament. In the long term, cultural exchanges would strengthen the respect between nations: 'A young man from one country who has travelled under normal conditions to another, and has had genuine contacts with his contemporaries there, seldom fails to bring back sound ideas about that country, and often develops a keen appreciation of its merits' (League of Nations Secretariat 1938, 150).

IS officials saw the importance of targeting the youth as well, in order to shape a new generation that understood the importance of the League. IS official Gabrielle Radziwill phrased it somewhat cunningly in 1923: 'La jeunesse d'aujourd'hui c'est la opinion publique de demain; c'est dans beaucoup de cas le gouvernements de demain' (Radziwill 1923). Together with the ICIC and the League of Nations societies

set up by civil society actors in member states, the IS coordinated some educational programs. For the ICIC, the summer school was a perfect activity in which students from different nations would learn about each other's cultures. As with the university exchanges, the IIC gathered information on all summer schools taking place throughout Europe and published a comprehensive list (IIC 1928).

Especially interesting for this paper are the summer schools taking place in Geneva, where national League societies cooperated with the Secretariat. The national societies saw the organisation of these summer schools in Geneva as a good opportunity to educate school children on the importance of international cooperation. The most influential of these societies, the British League of Nations Union (LNU) held a first summer school in 1923 and attracted most people in 1937, when 350 school children from notable public schools travelled to Geneva (McCarthy 2015, 114). The overarching International Federation of League of Nations Societies (IFLNS) started with similar summer schools in 1927 and offered parallel programs in English, French and German for students coming to Geneva (IFLNS, 1932). The Secretariat opened their premises to these summer schools and the list of speakers contained high League officials. Secretariat directors often described the activities of their own section.

I will discuss how these summer schools fit in the strategy of the League's IS. The section had a limited mandate to operate but cooperated with the League societies to improve the image of the international organisation. From the perspective of the IS and the ICIC, the summer schools in Geneva were an opportunity to target the school children and students. Some of the programs of these events contained specific sessions on moral disarmament, but the summer schools themselves were also clear examples of how the League tried to achieve it. For a week or two, the League societies and the Secretariat had the opportunity to shape the international mind amongst the 'public opinion of tomorrow' at the headquarters in Geneva.

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