

# N. Politis (1872–1942), a “governments’ intellectual’: the promotion of the idea of intellectual cooperation as a basis for world peace

Marilena Papadaki

Papadaki Marilena. 2022. “N. Politis (1872-1942), a “governments’ intellectual’: the promotion of the idea of intellectual cooperation as a basis for world peace”. *Centenary of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations*. Geneva, 15-16.  
<https://intellectualcooperation.org/papadaki-2022>

Nicolas Politis (1872-1942) played a major role in the socio-political scene of his time, not only as a French academic and theorist of international law, but also as a Greek diplomat and politician. He simultaneously drew on all areas of his acknowledged competence and in doing so, he intervened at three levels of action, that of France, Greece and new international institutions in The Hague, Paris, Geneva and United States of America. His sociological-based international law doctrine sought a reconciliation of individual liberty with social justice and had as its main element “social solidarity” which could be developed through “social conscience”, a concept firstly introduced by the French constitutionalist Léon Duguit. This idea was at the basis of his activity, within the framework of the League of Nations, to create a system of collective security that could prevent one national group from dominating another through warfare. Politis strongly believed in the power of international cooperation and the basic role the international elites had in order to inform and introduce people of all countries to a new culture of peace and collaboration.<sup>10</sup> As one of the most fervent supporters of the “spirit of Geneva”, he gave innumerable speeches in front of various groups of interest (including in front of the Committee on Intellectual Cooperation), supporting LON’s role in the establishment of a new international order based on peace and legality. Among the best-known academic societies of the post-war period, in which Politis developed considerable activity, were the Institute of International Law, the International Juridical Union of Paris, the Institut des Hautes Études Internationales of Geneva, the École des Hautes Études Internationales of Paris and others. He was also a founder member and later President of the Hague Academy of International law, financed by the Carnegie Endowment as a graduate school that brought together every summer specialists in international law from all continents.

Politis encouraged the construction of an international network of people that would work for a common goal: “create peace” by organizing meetings of statesmen and scientists, literary, artistic and press conferences, teacher-student exchanges and university trips. He even encouraged church networking in order to promote international peace. He considered that the question of peace had to be taken out of pure ideology and placed on the solid ground of scientific documentation: “The problem of peace”, he stated “is in the last analysis only a question of education.”<sup>11</sup> For him, the notion of international spirit, the counterpart of the notion of absolute state sovereignty, had to be sought in all countries and at all levels of education, in schools, colleges, universities and had to be achieved by all means of intellectual training.<sup>12</sup> According to Politis, the Paris Pact of 1928, wishing to “outlaw war” would never have any practical value other than that which public opinion would attribute to it. It would therefore be essential to introduce the public opinion of all countries to the importance of the peaceful settlement of international disputes. In addition, Politis argued that it was necessary to promote the collaboration of all the major institutions that worked for the organization and maintenance of peace, notably the League of Nations, the Pan- American

---

<sup>10</sup> Jacques, Politis, *L’avenir de l’Europe*, Neuchâtel 1946, p. 129-131.

<sup>11</sup> APNP, 211/21, Manuel général de l’Instruction primaire, 16 avril 1927, n° 30, Nicolas, Politis, « La Dotation Carnegie », p. 546.

<sup>12</sup> APNP, 211/21, « Inauguration de l’École des Hautes Études Internationales, Discours de François Albert, Louis Loucheur, Nicolas Politis, Arthur Fontaine, Étienne Fournel, Julien Luchaire », Extrait de la *Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, 1925, p. 10.

Union, the PCIJ, as well as to encourage States, even outside these institutions, to become truly aware of their international duties.<sup>13</sup>

During the XIII Assembly of the League of Nations, chaired by Politis, the education of public opinion in international affairs and international cooperation was the central topic of the debates and led to a series of decisions, including the establishment of a radiotelegraph station to broadcast weekly news in several languages on the work of the League and its results. The Assembly paid tribute to the International Union of Associations for the LON for its efforts to educate public opinion and diffuse the idea of an “international spirit”. It also called the attention of governments to an enquiry into the preparation of a special education training program to support LON and accepted a draft convention on the international circulation of educational files. Finally, the Committee of Intellectual Cooperation was demanded to study methods of enabling the international press collaboration in order to develop a better mutual understanding between nations, and thus contribute to the organization of world peace.<sup>14</sup>

When Politis was Greek Ambassador in Paris, the idea of bringing the elites together to achieve the ideal of world peace found its expression in the preparation and expansion in France, of a Delphic festival, an initiative of the Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos and his wife, Eva Palmer. These were athletic and theatrical events held in the very places where the ancient Amphictyonic League was located. According to the founders, the aim was to transmit morals, customs, concepts and institutions through the communication of international elites. Politis supported the promotion of the Delphic idea by taking advantage of its prestige within the Institute for Intellectual Cooperation and the Carnegie Endowment. As ambassador, he also strongly supported the project of creating the Cité Universitaire of Paris who would facilitate the circulation and communication of international youth and was also the founder of the Greek home in it.

The main lines of Politis socio-political engagement over the course of his life are linked to a new type of intellectual, the “governments’ intellectual”, who appeared on the international scene at the beginning of the 20th century. This type of intellectuals were often reformists who did not believe that one could improve the condition of people’s lives by force or by overturning the social order. “Governments’ intellectuals” promoted the debate and reasoned arguments and sought to make themselves useful by drawing upon their academic skills to inform opinion and guide the actions of statesmen. Most often, they were scholars involved in already existing international political or scholarly institutions or the new bodies created in the years immediately preceding and following World War I. Independent academic actors accredited by various states as diplomats, experts, arbitrators, and even political representatives, the multiple competences of “governments’ intellectuals” gave them the resources to accomplish their goal: to strengthen the relations between the elites in orders to draw the scholarly and political worlds closer together. During the interwar years, they even attempted to persuade policymakers that scientific expertise could be an effective tool in the service of international government. Their conferences, international scholarly institutions, and the reviews they founded or to which they contributed to were conceived as bridges responsible for ensuring the circulation of elites and ideas at the international level.

---

<sup>13</sup> APNP, 217/48, Lettre de Politis à R. Broda, League for the Organization of Progress.

<sup>14</sup> APNP, 222/82, Discours de clôture de l’Assemblée de Politis.