

Lost in Broadcasting: League of Nations, International Broadcasting and Swiss Neutrality¹

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Abstract. This article delves into the historical context of cross-border radio broadcasting during the 1930s by the League of Nations and the significant impact of Switzerland's neutrality as the host country on this international organization. Drawing from the recently digitized and accessible League of Nations archive in Geneva, this narrative unveils a minor conflict of interest that evolved into a notable political crisis, marking an international legal precedent by showcasing the influence wielded by a smaller host nation upon a global organization.

The architects of the League of Nations envisioned Geneva as an ideal hub for the organization's activities, complete with modern communication technologies for global outreach. However, Switzerland's neutral stance posed an obstacle to the establishment of the League's radio broadcasting infrastructure. Recognizing the absence of robust emergency communications, transport links, as well as a dedicated radio station in Geneva during the mid-1920s, the League of Nations sought an agreement with the Radio Swiss station. Consequently, the League of Nations own radio station, Radio-Nations, commenced broadcasting on February 2, 1932, coinciding with the start of the Conference for the Reduction and Limitation of Arms.

By May 1938, amidst mounting tensions in Europe, Switzerland chose to assert complete neutrality within the League. Discussions within the Federal Council revolved around the possibility of suspending the agreement made on May 21, 1930, along with the support for Radio Nations. Unexpectedly, on November 3, 1938, the League of Nations' leadership in Geneva expressed the desire to re-evaluate the 1930 convention. The outbreak of The First World War drastically reshaped the relationship between the League of Nations and Radio-Nations. Switzerland decided against entering into a new agreement with the League of Nations, leading to the closure of Radio-Nations on February 2, 1942.

Maintaining the nation's neutrality, the Swiss government vigilantly observed the events unfolding during the War. During the peak of Nazi Germany's advances, Bern adopted stringent measures against the League of Nations, upholding a resolute diplomatic stance. However, the Swiss stance towards the League of Nations and the division of ownership of Radio-Nations gradually shifted from 1943, culminating in the

¹ English translation from the Russian text: Khodnev A. S. Lost in Broadcasting: Liga Natsiy, mezhdunarodnoe radioveshchanie i shveytsarskiy neytralitet. *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta* [MGIMO Review of International Relations]. 16(5). P. 7–27. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2023-5-92-7-27>

resolution of several financial matters. Ultimately, in 1947, the League of Nations' liquidation commission transferred the remaining assets of Radio-Nations and its radio waves to the United Nations.

Keywords: international organization; League of Nations; Radio-Nations; international broadcasting; Switzerland; neutrality; international intellectual cooperation; The First World War

In 1919, the Treaty of Versailles founded the League of Nations. The new international body was intended to serve as a reliable guarantor of the peace established after the First World War. At its peak, over 60 countries were members of the League. Its effectiveness largely depended on the role of the great powers. In her overview of the history and historiography of the League, Susan Pedersen stressed that, despite all its flaws, the League of Nations was “a training ground [...] where they learned skills, built alliances, and began to craft that fragile network of norms and agreements by which our world is regulated, if not quite governed” (Pedersen 2007: 1116). However, “the great powers, unwilling to commit themselves too deeply, gladly dropped some of these issues at the League’s door” (Pedersen 2007: 1108). The conclusion concerning the great powers’ reluctance “to commit deeply” and take specific action is generally correct. This observation, however, applies not only to large states, but also to Switzerland, the country that had undertaken to create comfortable conditions in Geneva for the League’s work.

The purpose of this article is to explore the case of an international organization’s host country failing to create the proper conditions to enable that organization to use the media available at the time to extensively inform the world about its activities. The League of Nations found itself in a difficult situation in Switzerland in the interwar period, a fact that frequently affected its ability to achieve its goals and impacted the overall development of international relations. Switzerland was concerned with preserving its neutral status enshrined in the Hague Convention of 1907, and as contradictions mounted in the Versailles world order in the 1930s, the country started to put pressure on the League on the matter of independent radio broadcasting. Documents from the League’s recently digitized and opened archive in Geneva shed light on this story, in which a minor conflict of interests snowballed into a major political crisis and an international legal precedent, thereby demonstrating the kind of influence a small host country can have on an international organization.

The League’s archive is kept at the UN Palace of Nations at the Library of the UN Office in Geneva. The entire collection spans 15 linear kilometres of archives and records. Its website says that one recent important project was “Total Digital Access to the League of Nations Archives” (2017–2022), which ensured free online access to documents.² This article uses files from this collection: documents of the League’s

² Archives. URL: <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/library-archives/archives>

Secretariat; decisions of its Assembly and Council; correspondence with the Swiss authorities; originals of diplomatic treaties registered with the League; reports by G. F. van Dissel, the head of the Committee for Communications and Transit; correspondence of members of the League's Secretariat with listeners; and the personal archive of Seán Lester, the League's acting Secretary-General.

Prior to the 1990s, historiography of the League of Nations was fairly scanty. After the Second World War, scholars rarely turned to the history of the League. The only time they paid attention to it was when there was an anniversary of the establishment of the organization, in general works. The most well-known and detailed study of the history of the League was produced by Francis Paul Walters in 1952, which was reprinted on several occasions (Walters 1967). Since Walters had for many years worked in high-ranking positions in the League's Secretariat, the book contains much in terms of personal impressions and memoirs, but it is not based on archival documents and does not provide a complete analysis of the League's history. It also contains few references.

Ruzanna M. Ilyuhina's book, the first in Russian historiography to research the history of the League from its founding and until 1934, was an important historiographic landmark (Ilyuhina 1982). She showed Russian readers the history of the first years of the League's political activities and certain ideological doctrines that guided the actors in that international organization. The book offers a lot of interesting personal descriptions of the League's diplomats and its Secretariat's employees.

However, true interest in the history of the League blossomed after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar world. Studying the experience of the League – with its discussions of multipolarity – became relevant when the new multipolar world order was emerging in the 1990s. There was also renewed interest in the way the League handled other political issues. It is no accident that Susan Pedersen titled her article quoted above “Back the League of Nations” (Pedersen 2007). Over the last 30 years, the number of books about the League has grown exponentially, and, in addition to multipolarity, they focus on other topics, such as sovereignty, the right to self-determination, the history of the mandate system and “failed” states, and other topics that are relevant today (Callahan 1999; Goto-Shibata 2020; Henig 2019; Ostrower 1996; Pedersen 2015; Yearwood 2009).

Several important books on the history of the League of Nations have been published in Russia recently as well. Irina A. Khormach studied archival documents on the history of the League's relations with the Soviet Union (Khormach 2011; 2017). Natalia Vasileva wrote a comprehensive study of new and old approaches of Russian historians to interpreting the history of the League (Vasileva 2017). And in another book, Vasileva studies the image of the League of Nations formed by Russian emigres in the early 1920s (Vasileva 2020). Alexander Khodnev has written essays on the history of the League (Khodnev 1995) and several articles on the League's action in colonial matters and the mandate system (Khodnev 2021a; 2021b). The renowned St. Petersburg historian Vladimir Fokin has researched individual aspects of the League's history and the published sources (Fokin 2010).

There is only one work on the history of the League's radio broadcasting. It was authored by Antoine Fleury, Professor Emeritus of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Geneva, who participated in the symposium on the history of the League of Nations in November 1980 (Fleury 1983). This article considers in detail the evolution of Switzerland's policy towards the League and the stance assumed by Bern, while the history of the League's radio is pushed into the background. Therefore, the issue of the history of the League's international broadcasting and the way it was affected by Switzerland's neutrality remains under-researched.

The League of Nations and Radio Appeared at the Same Time

In December 1925, the League's Secretary-General Eric Drummond was asked to speak in Paris for his speech to be broadcast in the United States. American and European radio stations decided to test long-range broadcasting in January 1926. The task was to transmit the signal from Europe across the Atlantic, to the United States. The BBC's Director of Programmes and one of the first radio commentators, Arthur Richard Burrows, wrote to the American Arthur Sweetser, Chief of the Press Division of the League's Information Section, and explained, "During this week, the several stations in America will remain silent during specified periods to enable local listeners to 'reach out' for transmissions coming from [...] Europe [...] A general participation can hardly be expected seeing that the European transmissions in order to be really effective, must take place somewhere about 5 o'clock in the morning."³ Eric Palmer, who was among those organizing this test, believed that Drummond's talk on the subject of "radio's potentialities" in furthering the work of the League was necessary "in the interests of world peace and general education."⁴

The idea of a long-range broadcasting trial was to test more than equipment. The United States did not accede to the League of Nations, as it refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, of which the League's Covenant was part. The broadcast of January 25, 1926 was meant to remind the audiences of the League's existence and to promote it in the USA.

Addressing the United States, Drummond said, "Radio and the League of Nations are both in their youth. They were born at approximately the same time, and are growing and developing on somewhat the same lines. Assuredly their fruitful cooperation will make for the peace of the world. How rapidly civilization has travelled! Only a few centuries ago Columbus took three months to reach America. A century ago it took weeks to send news to the Far East. To-day information can be put on the air in London, received in New York, re-transmitted and heard in London [...] distance and time almost cease to have importance [...] The full development of radio must render

³ International Broadcasting Tests – January 25th, February 1st. *LON Archives*. File R1140/14/48542/28231. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/international-broadcasting-tests-january-25th-february-1st>

⁴ Ibid.

international cooperation, and therefore the task of the League, infinitely easier.”⁵ The long-range broadcasting experiment was generally a success, and the United States heard the voice of the League of Nations for the first time.

At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the Allies agreed that the League would be headquartered in Geneva. Initially, this suggestion was met with a less-than-enthusiastic response; moreover, Deputy Secretary-General Francis Paul Walters recorded that French and Belgian members of the League’s founding Committee were displeased with the idea and insisted that Brussels be chosen to headquarter the League. They believed Belgium to have earned the right to be the seat of the international organization, having suffered in the “battle of right against might” in The First World War (Walters 1967: 36). Yet Woodrow Wilson, Robert Cecil, and Jan Christian Smuts spoke in favour of Geneva, claiming that Brussels would link the new organizations with the negative memories of the War (Walters 1967: 36). Ultimately, 12 out of 19 members of the Committee voted for Geneva, and the matter was settled (Walters 1967: 37).

Attempts to use radio for broadcasting had been made since 1920, when the League started its work. On December 13, 1920, “some hundreds waited intently for the first sounds which would come from the giant loud speaker which had been set up” in the League’s hall in Geneva (Lommers 2012: 59). Guglielmo Marconi, the inventor of the radio and a diplomat, who attended the Paris Peace Conference with the Italian delegation, ran an experimental broadcast from London. Those present recalled that reception in Geneva was poor, with static noise and interference, but the people assembled in the League’s hall in Geneva heard the words “Hello, Geneva!” and were amazed by what this new technology could do (Lommers 2012: 59).

Yet in 1920, and again in 1926, the League failed to launch regular broadcasts of news and other types of programmes, hindered by political circumstances that the League’s “founding fathers” had not foreseen: Switzerland’s neutrality got in the way of a close alliance between the League and radio.

Attendees of the Paris Peace Conference discussed the idea of radio communication with the League. In March, Colonel Edward M. House, a member of the U.S. delegation and an advisor to Woodrow Wilson, asked Swiss diplomat William Rappard whether it would be possible to build a radio station in Switzerland in the vicinity of the League’s headquarters (Fleury 1983: 196). Then the Swiss Federal Council made the decision to grant extra-territorial status to the lands of the League of Nations and consented to the project of building a radio and telegraph station. In April 1919, Colonel House sent an American advertising and wireless telegraph specialist to see Rappard to set up a sufficiently powerful transmitter to communicate with the entire world (Fleury 1983: 197).

Yet the events in the United States were not conducive to implementing the project of building a radio station in Geneva. In 1920, when the U.S. Congress made the decision not to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and, consequently, the Covenant of the

⁵ Ibid.

League of Nations, Washington forgot about building the radio station. Bern was very much relieved at the news as people in the Swiss government were worried that the project would be violation of the Hague Convention of 1907, which set forth the obligations of neutral states in the event of war. In particular, Article 3 of the Convention prohibited erecting wireless telegraphy stations in a neutral Power for the purposes of military communication.⁶ Swiss politicians saw a possible threat of violating the country's neutral status by building a wireless telegraph station in the Swiss territory, which would not be controlled by the Swiss authorities. At the same time, the authorities of the Canton of Geneva and federal politicians were interested in the League of Nations being headquartered in Switzerland.

Communications, Transit, and Radio for the League of Nations

One of the main bodies of the League of Nations was the Permanent Secretariat, the first institution of its kind of an international organization. Eric Drummond, the future leader of the Secretariat, was also its principal architect. He rejected the proposed state-centric structure, whereby the Secretariat would be made up of representative missions of the great powers only, and their personnel would report back to their governments. Instead, Drummond proposed creating departments that would be in charge of individual functions: legal, economic and financial, mandates, etc., to support each principal area of the League's activities. Another bold decision taken by Drummond was to establish the institution of international officials compiled of employees hired specifically to work in the League of Nations and not transferred from national bureaucracies, whose loyalty would be exclusively to the League. Such a Secretariat primarily carried out the decisions of the Assembly and the Council of the League of Nations and had certain autonomy in promoting international projects, corresponding with governments and international organizations, and organizing the League's activities in Geneva.

In the League's first years, the Secretariat did not insist on building the radio station, as they were busy setting up uninterrupted telephone and telegraph communications and transportation. In November 1920, the talks between Bernardo Attolico, director of the newly created Communications and Transit Section, and Robert Haab, a member of the Swiss Federal Council and head of the Department of Posts and Railways, did not touch upon the subject of the radio station. Attolico was concerned with the issues of "a glut on telegraphic communications" and privileges for the League of Nations in using telephone lines at certain hours. He also asked for better rail transit between Paris and Geneva.⁷ Communications with Paris were vital for virtually all

⁶ Convention (V) respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land. The Hague, 18 October 1907. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/hague/1907/en/18888>

⁷ Priority of Telephone Calls for the Secretariat. *LON Archives*. File: R1365/26/8597/8597. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/priority-of-telephone-calls-for-the-secretariat-and-press-and-improvement-of-railway-communications-during-the-assembly-professor-attolico-reports-discussion-with-conseiller-federal-mr-haab-at-berne-of-questions-on-this-subject-submitt>

members of the League. Many embassies in Paris expanded their staff with special personnel collecting information and preparing documents for their representatives in Geneva. For instance, there was a special Japanese Bureau for the Affairs of the League of Nations established in Paris in 1921 (Goto-Shibata 2020: 28).

However, within the very first months, the lack of stable radio communications led to difficulties in the global coordination of the League's activities. In 1921, the Information Section of the League's Secretariat raised the question of purchasing wireless telegraph equipment. In 1921, upon instructions from the Secretary-General, Adrianus Pelt, an employee at the Information Section, conducted talks with Great Britain's Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company Ltd. on purchasing wireless telegraph equipment. The League's Financial Section, however, refused to purchase the expensive equipment.⁸

In 1925–1926, the League's Secretariat came to understand that, in the event of an emergency or the need to respond to international crises, the Geneva headquarters did not have reliable means of communications or transit. France put this issue to the League's Council in December 1921. At that time, however, the Council did not discuss radio broadcasting. Rather, they discussed “measures to be taken in order that full use might be made of the existing means of communication by rail, air telegraph and radio-telegraph.”⁹ The League did not touch on the issue of independent radio broadcasting.

It took two more years of discussions until, on September 24, 1928, the League's Assembly passed the resolution on the need for “creation of a wireless station for the purpose of providing the League with independent communications in time of emergency.”¹⁰

The League's Assembly returned to the issue of creating an independent wireless station on September 21, 1929. The problem of the League's independent contacts with the outside world required involving the influential French jurist and public figure René Cassin as a rapporteur.¹¹ He said that the spirit and provisions of the Covenant of the League of Nations call upon the members of the League “to facilitate by every means in their power the rapid meeting of the Council in times of emergency,”¹² which required that the League have its own radio station. Cassin claimed that the

⁸ Wireless Communication with Geneva – Dossier concerning. *LON Archives*. File: R1583/40/11641/11641. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/wireless-communication-with-geneva>

⁹ Communication of Importance to the League of Nations at Times of emergency. *LON Archives*. Reference Code: C-406-1927-VIII_EN. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/communications-of-importance-to-the-league-of-nations-at-times-of-emergency>

¹⁰ Wireless Station to be Created with a View to Providing the League of Nations with Independent Communication. *LON Archives*. Reference Code: C-514-1928-VIII_EN. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/wireless-station-to-be-created-with-a-view-to-providing-the-league-of-nations-with-independent-communications-in-time-of-emergency-report-by-the-polish-representative>

¹¹ In 1948, René Cassin co-authored the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

¹² Establishment of a Wireless Station. *LON Archives*. Reference Code: A-85-1929-IX_EN. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/establishment-of-a-wireless-station-destined-to-ensure-independent-communications-to-the-league-of-nations-in-times-of-emergency-report-of-the-third-committee-to-the-assembly-rapporteur-m-rene-cassin-france>

main purpose of creating the station would be for the League of Nations to have at its disposal and under its direct management in case of an emergency independent wireless communication with as many League members as possible. The proposal was to use a European range station that would “remain under the management of the Swiss authorities.”¹³ Cassin proposed that “the Swiss Government will be able to be represented at the station [...] by an observer.”¹⁴ Cassin’s project, therefore, focused solely on the need to use radio for emergency communication, and not for public broadcasting.

The Agreement of May 21, 1930, and the Start of the League of Nations’ Broadcasting

In 1929, the League’s Assembly supported Cassin’s plan, which formed the basis of the “Agreement between the Swiss Federal Council and the Secretary-General of the League of Nations Concerning the Establishment and Operation in the Neighbourhood of Geneva of a Wireless Station” of May 21, 1930. The Agreement was signed by the Secretary-General Eric Drummond and Giuseppe Motta,¹⁵ Switzerland’s foreign minister in 1920–1938, who was also elected several times to the office of the President of the Swiss Confederation.

Article 1 of the Agreement of May 21, 1930 states that, in order to meet the needs of the League of Nations, a wireless station known as “Radio-Nations” would be built in the neighbourhood of Geneva. In normal circumstances, the station would be managed by Radio-Suisse, while in emergencies, it would come under the direct management of the League.¹⁶ Consequently, the League had succeeded in convincing the Bern authorities to accord the League’s radio station significant independence. All disputes over the operations of Radio-Nations were to be submitted to the arbitration court appointed by the Permanent Court of International Justice in the Hague.¹⁷ In that manner, Switzerland preserved its sovereignty and neutrality, even if in a curtailed manner: the League owned the Radio-Nations brand and essentially determined the contents of its general broadcasting, but in emergencies, the entire broadcasting and receiving equipment would come under the League’s control.

The League’s Radio-Nations was officially inaugurated on February 2, 1932, on the day the Conference for the Reduction and Limitation of Armaments began. G. F. van Dissel, head of the Committee for Communications and Transit, emphasized that

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Accord entre. Accord entre le Conseil Federal Suisse et le Secetaire Genera de la Societe des Nations concernant l'etablissement et l'exploitation pres de Geneve d'une station radioelectrique. *LON Archives*. File CRID134/343/166(1-2). URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/wireless-station-of-the-league-of-nations-convention-and-agreement-between-the-league-of-nations-and-the-swiss-government>

¹⁷ Ibid.

the first broadcasts demonstrated good transmission and reception.¹⁸ For instance, van Dissel received a letter from Roberto Cardon in Brazil, who excitedly informed him that he had listened for a test Radio-Nations broadcast in Rio de Janeiro for three hours on February 10, 1932 and “the reception was perfect, clear, and full of tone.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, it should be admitted that the League clearly lagged behind advanced states in setting up radio broadcasts to other countries.

Radio-Nations broadcast official, political, and private programmes. The latter featured music, advertising, and speeches by politicians and cultural figures representing both the League and other countries. For instance, the list of private broadcasts for October 1932 included a speech by member of the Swiss Government Giuseppe Motta from Bern.

The League’s Information Section used the radio station both for broadcasting as such, and for transmitting, using Morse code, news on the League’s activities to agencies and the media of countries in Europe and beyond.²⁰

Official programmes were mandatorily checked and edited in the League’s Information Section. In the 1930, the League’s Secretariat tried to confine the political content of the League’s radio broadcasts to brief information about the activities and decisions of the League’s Assembly and Council. In 1932, official programmes were still dominated by news on the crisis in Manchuria, which Japan had seized from China in 1931–1932, but later, such news items were fewer and fewer. The Manchuria conflict faced by the League was the first major breach of the Versailles-Washington system. However, acting in the spirit of conciliation policy, Radio-Nations broadcast speeches of the League’s representative and all parties to the conflict: Lord Lytton (November 20, 1932), the Chinese diplomat Go Taizi (November 27, 1932), and Japan’s representative in the League Yōsuke Matsuoka (December 4, 1932).²¹ Broadcasts from Geneva refused to directly call Japan an aggressor.

Subsequent political challenges faced by the League were briefly mentioned in Radio-Nations information bulletins. The League responded to the Abyssinia Crisis, but its intervention was even less effective than its involvement in the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The League’s internal bulletins commented on Italy’s aggression against Ethiopia in 1935–1936, the actions taken by the League in November 1935 in the form of a Council decision to impose sanctions on Italy, and on the Council’s resolution of July 4, 1936 to lift the sanctions. Radio-Nations broadcast only short reports on the Council’s decisions on the matter.

¹⁸ Operation of the League Wireless Station – Reports by M. van Dissel for the period 2 February 1932 to 31 December 1933. *LON Archives*. File: R4318/9G/6497/509. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/operation-of-the-league-wireless-station-reports-by-m-van-dissel-for-the-period-2-february-1932-to-31-december-1933>

¹⁹ League Wireless Station – Various Correspondence with Individuals and Associations. *LON Archives*. File: R2594/9G/32525/225. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/league-wireless-station-various-correspondence-with-individuals-and-associations>

²⁰ Information Section. *LON Archives*. File S937/247/3. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/nwr4-nghe-48sp>

²¹ *Ibid.*

In 1936, the Information Section released many overviews of international media on the militarization of the Rhineland, but these documents were intended only to be distributed within the League and were not broadcast on the radio.²²

The League's Secretariat discussed the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), yet both the Assembly and the Council took a long time to come to a decision on specific steps (Naumov 2016: 47) and adopt any resolutions on the Spanish question, claiming that domestic conflicts did not come under the League's purview. The news reported only general information on the Spanish Civil War. Nevertheless, as the war was transforming into a major challenge to European and global security, the League's Information Section attempted to provide broader coverage of the matter. A Canadian listener, W. Wood wrote to Geneva that he had listened to several news broadcasts in English on Radio-Nations in October–November 1938 on the humanitarian problems of Spanish refugees, the rationing of bread and other foods, martial law in Madrid and Barcelona, the many victims of the war, and the maritime and air blockade.²³

The League's political prestige was gravely undermined during the Spanish Civil War and other conflicts (Naumov 2016: 62), which had its effect on radio broadcasting. All the events and crises that proved fateful for international relations in 1938–1939 went virtually ignored on the radio, unless there were relevant decisions of the Assembly and the Council.

In the mid-1930s, the Information Section prepared many texts on the League's social and humanitarian achievements for broadcast. Radio-Nations went from mostly information and political programmes to educational broadcasts. The League had an influential International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC), whose initiatives included coordinating the international management of intellectual projects on education. These goals of the projects were to educate people on the concept of peacefulness in the broad sense, promote the values of moral disarmament, and explain the goals and activities of the League in supporting peace and international cooperation. Radio-Nations actively engaged in these educational activities, carrying out the ICIC programme in educating the public on the League's goals and activities.

On May 18, 1935, Radio-Nations broadcast the address of the League's Secretary-General to the youth on the occasion of Goodwill Day in English, French, and Spanish. The text had some hints of concern: "People in all countries want peace, and in all countries, we see more weapons and soldiers," and the youth were called upon to "maintain peace in the world" based on "goodwill and mutual understanding" (*Les Causeries Radiophoniques ... 1935*: 282). The League's broadcasting schedule also had a speech by the British classical scholar Professor Gilbert Murray, ICIC President, on

²² *Revue des Commentaires de la Presse sur la Société des Nations*. *LON Archives*. Item PC-2765-1936_BI. URL: <https://archives.unige.ch/revue-des-commentaires-de-la-presse-sur-la-societe-des-nations-269>

²³ *Radio Nations – Correspondence with Listeners*. *LON Archives*. File R5196/13/31318/19270/Jacket11. URL: <https://archives.unige.ch/mkrz-wqn9-sh9s>

the League's achievements in international intellectual cooperation.²⁴ Two 1936 Radio-Nations broadcasts were of particular interest for listeners. One was dedicated to nutrition, and the other to the status of women with respect to gender equality.²⁵ Both problems were related to people's everyday life. René Cassin is credited with being the first person to explain the League's focus on these subjects: "Everything that concerns mankind concerns the League of Nations."²⁶

The broadcast on nutrition was not only intended to promote a healthy lifestyle. In the mid-1930s, the global economy was still experiencing the aftermath of the global depression of 1929–1933. Many countries had high levels of unemployment, and economic growth rates left much to be desired. In 1935, Australia's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom Stanley Bruce proposed at the League's Assembly that a general study should be made on nutrition, from the point of view of both health and all economic aspects (Walters 1967: 754). This was vital for giving a boost to agriculture and the global economy in general.²⁷

In the broadcast on the status of women, the newscaster said that the League's Assembly decreed in 1935 that an international committee of experts should study women's legal status in different states. The first results showed that women had the right to vote in just 24 of the League's member, while only 14 countries had granted women the unrestricted right to work.²⁸

In the meantime, the problem of international broadcasting attracted the attention of many governments. In 1931, the League's Assembly instructed the Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIC) in Paris to research issues arising from international broadcasting. In 1932, the League's International Committee of Intellectual Cooperation, together with the IIC, convened a committee of experts to draft an international convention on radio broadcasting. The Intergovernmental Conference on the International Convention Concerning the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace was held in Geneva on September 17–25, 1936 and was chaired by former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway, Arnold Christopher Ræstad (Use of Broadcasting 1936: 168–170). The Convention mandated that states ban any broadcast that could damage good international understanding by transmitting statements known in advance to be false, and that states take steps to rectify such information.²⁹ In a special provision, the contracting governments undertook to transmit only verified information that would

²⁴ Ce que fait la Coopération Intellectuelle. *Bulletin l'Enseignement DE LA SOCIÉTÉ DES NATION*, 1935, 2. 285–288. LON Archives. Reference code: 767423. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/bulletin-de-lenseignement-de-la-societe-des-nations-n-2>

²⁵ File 767420 – Bulletin of League of Nation Teaching – The Teaching of the Principles and Facts of international co-operation. N°4. LON Archives. Reference Code 0000767420_D0010. Filename 0000767420_D0010.pdf. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/wqqb-65bx-f49e>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Text of the Convention. LON Archives. File CRID70/272/30-1bis. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/text-of-the-convention-3>

not cause harm to other peoples.³⁰ Switzerland, like many other states, took part in the conference and signed the Convention, thus undertaking to maintain and ensure uninterrupted Radio-Nations broadcasts.

On August 1, 1939, in order to comply with the 1936 Convention, the League's Secretariat introduced a new procedure for radio broadcasts: the Information Section was made responsible for setting up all broadcasts, and all texts, particularly the texts of private individuals, were to be approved by the Section's Director before going on the air.³¹

Even though the emphasis in the League's activities in the late 1930s shifted from political action to technical issues in social and humanitarian operations, the importance of League's broadcasts amid deteriorating political circumstances is hard to overestimate. The League promoted new ideas in international cooperation and informed listeners about new projects. Susan Pedersen stressed the changes the League introduced over this short history: "Their words were out in the world, a world now remade by literacy, print, air travel, and radio waves, and could not be recalled" (Pedersen 2015: 406).

Switzerland Goes Back to Full Neutrality

In the late 1930s, active broadcasting from Geneva was hampered by the change in the Swiss government's attitude to the League of Nations. A pre-war crisis was brewing in Europe, and several states were progressively leaning towards aggressive actions: Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in Europe, and Japan in the Far East. The League of Nations failed to effectively contain those aggressive forces and prevent the collapse of the Versailles-Washington order. In this international situation, the Swiss government decided to bolster the country's neutral status. On April 20, 1938, the League's Secretary-General Joseph Avenol received a memorandum from the Federal Council, signed by Giuseppe Motta, on Switzerland's return to complete neutrality within the League.³² After talks on this subject held in Geneva, Motta assured the League's leadership that Switzerland remained "faithful to the League and would "continue to collaborate" with it.³³ Subsequent events demonstrated that the "faithful" cooperation did not materialize.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ League of Nations Radio Station – Use of the Station for Broadcasting (discussion between private and official transmissions). *LON Archive*. File R4318/9G/19831/509. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/station-radioelectrique-de-la-societe-des-nations-utilisation-de-la-station-pour-la-radiodiffusion-discussion-entre-la-transmissions-prives-et-officielles>

³² Neutrality of the Swiss Confederation within the Framework of the League of Nations. *LON Archives*. Reference Code C-137-M-82-1938-V_EN. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/neutrality-of-the-swiss-confederation-within-the-framework-of-the-league-of-nations-2>

³³ Switzerland and the League. File: R5799/50/33623/33588. *LON Archives*. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/switzerland-and-the-league-neutrality-of-switzerland-correspondence-with-the-government-of-switzerland>

The Swiss government believed that, despite the balanced and diplomatic nature of Radio-Nations broadcasts, they could involve the country in conflicts with third parties. In the late 1930s, the Swiss Federal Council discussed the possibility of suspending the Agreement of May 21, 1930 and its support for Radio-Nations.

Quite unexpectedly, the leadership of the League's Secretariat in Geneva helped Bern find a reason to shut down the League's radio. On November 3, 1938, the League sent a letter to the Swiss Federal Council and Radio-Swiss proposing that the Agreement of May 21, 1930 between the League's Secretary-General and Radio-Suisse be revised.³⁴ The League was in the grips of a major financial crisis and wanted Radio-Swiss to increase the funding for Radio-Nations. On February 15, 1939, the Swiss Federal Council eagerly agreed to revise the Agreement.³⁵

The League of Nations, Radio Nations, and the Start of the First World War

The situation around the League and Radio-Nations, which continued its regular operations for a while, changed with the outbreak of the First World War. The League's Secretariat significantly reduced the number of staff, either because the overall amount of work shrank, or because some members of the League refused to pay their dues, declaring neutrality amid the war.

Additionally, Germany and Italy constantly threatened Switzerland, pointing out that it ran contrary to the country's neutral status to host the League of Nations on Swiss territory. The Swiss authorities sought not to give any of its aggressive neighbours grounds to believe that Swiss neutrality was anything but unshakeable. Bern chose to maintain its neutrality to the detriment of the League's work. On September 6, 1939, Switzerland closed down its border with France,³⁶ making for greater isolation of the Secretariat and the League's leadership in Geneva.

Panic was beginning to spread among the League's staff. At the start of the First World War, the League's Secretary-General, Joseph Avenol, sought to avoid conflicts with the Swiss government. Walters recalled that Avenol did not want the Swiss government to face any difficulties. So, he was ready to quickly move the Secretariat to the French city of Vichy. As 1940 began, the name of the city "carried no political significance" (Walters 1967: 802). Walters's very generously veils Avenol's strange actions in late 1939 to August 1940. For instance, in a private conversation in 1940, Avenol said that "Hitler had said 'quite nice things' about the League," and "Mussolini [...] was

³⁴ Radio-Nations – Revision of the 1930 agreement with Radio-Suisse and the 1930 agreement with the Swiss government. *LON Archives*. File: R4319/9G/35934/509/Jacket1. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/radio-nations-revision-de-la-convention-de-1930-avec-radio-suisse-de-laccord-de-1930-avec-le-gouvernement-suisse>

³⁵ League of Nations Wireless Station. League of Nations Wireless Station. (RADIO-NATIONS). *LON Archives*. Reference code C-56-M-53-1941_EN. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/league-of-nations-wireless-station-radio-nations>.

³⁶ Document Pp 274/1/323-324 – 6 September 1939. Sean Lester's Diary – Volume 1. *LON Private Archives*. Reference code: Pp 274/1/323-324. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/6-september-1939>

also not really unfriendly to the League.”³⁷ Avenol was rolling back the activities of the League’s Secretariat on the grounds of it being difficult to organize meetings of the Council and the Assembly. After France capitulated in June 1940, Avenol was getting ready to resign, submit to the Vichy regime, and shut down the League. In June 1940, he agreed to Princeton University’s proposal to move some of the League’s Secretariat to Princeton (Walters 1967: 809). On August 31, Avenol left the League. The Irish diplomat Seán Lester became the new acting Secretary-General, and continued to lead the remaining part of the Secretariat until the League was dissolved in April 1946.

Lester’s diary entry of July 7, 1941 described the atmosphere around the League and Radio-Nations. The Swiss federal authorities semi-officially informed Lester that they had changed their stance on the League’s radio station. They did not want to “tolerate on Swiss territory the station, even though fully controlled by Swiss officials.”³⁸ Another observation: per Germany’s demand, the Swiss authorities removed from circulation postal stamps bearing the emblem of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Palace of Nations, the League’s headquarters. Lester bemoaned the failure of the Swiss authorities to keep up their financial obligations to the League, although the Secretariat paid full salaries to its Swiss employees.³⁹

On January 27, 1940, the Swiss government sent the League of Nations an official notification on a problem with revising the Agreement of May 21, 1930 on Radio-Nations. At its meeting of January 23, 1940, the Swiss Federal Council made the decision to denounce the Agreement without revising it or concluding a new one. Consequently, Radio-Nations was expected to cease broadcasting on February 2, 1942.⁴⁰ On June 14, 1941, Seán Lester appealed to the Swiss government with a request “that the Agreement of 1930 should be allowed to continue in force for a period that might be fixed at one or two years” and “the maintenance of the status quo” continue “for one or two years, as from February 2nd, 1942.”⁴¹ Lester hoped that the war would be over quickly and the League of Nations would resume its activities. On June 23, 1941, he conducted talks with M. Zurlinden of the Federal Political Department, who confirmed that “the very existence of League of Nations radio station on Swiss territory is contrary to Swiss neutrality.”⁴² Lester asked Zurlinden whether there had been outside pressure applied to the government concerning the League’s radio station. The answer was that pressure had been applied “indirectly.”⁴³

³⁷ S. Lester’s Note on E. J. Phelan. *LON Private Archives*. About what J. Avenol told to E. J. Phelan in 1940 Regarding A. Hitler’s view of the League of Nations and the ILO. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/s-lesters-note-on-e-j-phelan>

³⁸ Document Pp 274/2/820-822 – 7 July 1941. *LON Private Archives*. Sean Lester’s Diary – Volume 2. Reference code: Pp 274/2/820-822. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/7-july-1941>

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ League of Nations Wireless Station. League of Nations Wireless Station. (Radio Nations). *LON Archives*. Reference code C-56-M-53-1941_EN. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/league-of-nations-wireless-station-radio-nations>

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Radio Nations – Revision of the 1930 agreement with Radio-Suisse and the 1930 Agreement with the Swiss Government. *LON Archives*. File: R4319/9G/35934/509/Jacket1. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/radio-nations-revision-de-la-convention-de-1930-avec-radio-suisse-de-laccord-de-1930-avec-le-gouvernement-suisse>

Bern's final official answer to Lester's request that the radio station's operations be extended was negative, stating that the proposal had been subjected to the most careful consideration, but that they were forced to respond that they were unable to accept it.⁴⁴ This meant shutting down Radio-Nation in Geneva.

The Swiss government diligently guarded Switzerland's neutrality and closely watched the course of the war. Amid German successes, the pressure of the Axis powers forced Bern to take the strictest measures and conduct unyielding diplomacy towards the League. Since 1943, Bern's attitude to the League's Radio-Nations began to change, and they managed to resolve several financial issues together.⁴⁵ The League desperately needed money to maintain the small staff remaining in Geneva and to pay for heating the Palace of Nations. To pay the bills, most of the equipment from the League-owned radio station was sold to Radio-Swiss. Lester explained the League's decision to shut down the radio station by the fact that it had no other option but to consent to the Swiss government's denouncing the 1930 Agreement, although he attempted to "have all action postponed until the end of the war."⁴⁶ Lester stressed that he "retained as the property of the League the special broadcasting studio in the League buildings with the declared object of facilitating at a later date the re-establishment of the League's station."⁴⁷ The League's Secretary-General also reserved the League's right to use the wavelengths assigned to Radio-Nations. Per these rights, in 1947 the League's liquidation commission transferred what remained of Radio-Nations and its wavelengths to the United Nations, as was confirmed in a letter to Seán Lester of April 17, 1947 from the UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The League and its Secretariat failed to make full use of the broadcasting and communications technologies of the time at a crucial moment amid mounting international military crises in Europe and Asia, which was spurred on by the aggressive policies of Germany, Italy, and Japan. The League's broadcasting was rolled back for an entire series of reasons: the League's dependence on its host country; the desire of Switzerland to transition from partial neutrality and cooperation with the League to complete neutrality; concessions to the Axis powers in the late 1930–early 1940s; and a clear lack of attention and non-interference on the part of great powers and

⁴⁴ League Wireless Station – Various Correspondence with Individuals and Associations. *LON Archives*. File: R2594/9G/32525/225. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/league-wireless-station-various-correspondence-with-individuals-and-associations>

⁴⁵ Radio-Nations. Resumption of Installations by Radio-Suisse. *LON Archives*. File R4320/9G/41392/509/Jacket2.

⁴⁶ Transfer to the United Nations of League Rights in the Wavelengths Attributed to Radio Nations. *LON Archives*. File: R4321/9G/44114/509. URL: <https://archives.ungeneva.org/transfer-to-the-united-nations-of-league-rights-in-the-wavelengths-attributed-to-radio-nations>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

members of the League. The leaders of the League's Secretariat made a series of errors when launching international broadcasting: first, they underestimated its potential, and then they relied too much on the Swiss authorities. The content and topics of the League's broadcasts changed significantly over their short history. The League's Secretariat saw that unresolved political problems were snowballing and causing damage to the League's international reputation. Since the mid-1930s, the League's Information Section and other sections of its Secretariat began to offer more programmes on social and humanitarian topics.

The history of the League's broadcasting shows how difficult it was for the international organization to keep working towards its goals amid an international crisis when the League's Secretariat was forced to operate in complete isolation. Contradictions between Bern and Geneva in the 1930s–1940s showed that neutrality and international governance did not mix well in the operations of a universal organization.

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