

Internationalism on the big screen: Films on the League of Nations

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Abstract

Building on the growing literature on the communication strategies of the League of Nations, this article discusses the films that a variety of actors made on the activities of the international organization. While the efforts of the League's Secretariat in Geneva are at the center of this article, it is important to acknowledge the films made by civil society actors, gathered in national League of Nations societies. Not constrained by the ban on propaganda that applied to the League officials, these societies tried to mobilize their audience by making emotional appeals and adapting the League's message to the national political context. After long delays and eventually with limited success, the Secretariat made its own talkie in the late 1930s, *The League at Work*. In all three films discussed in this article, the horrors of the First World War were portrayed to convince the audience that international cooperation was necessary to prevent a new catastrophe. With these films, the various actors promoted the League as the organization that could oversee a stable world order.

Keywords

League of Nations, cinematography, public opinion, propaganda, NGOs

1 Introduction

I explained to our Hollywood friends that obviously the League of Nations did not dare to engage in propaganda and so leaned backwards to avoid it. [...] Our film consequently will be a little more argumentative and propagandist than the original. (Eichelberger, 1937)

In October 1937, Clark Eichelberger, director of the American League of Nations Association (LNA) showcased a film produced by the League's Secretariat in Geneva, *The League of Nations at Work* to film experts in California. The LNA, operating independently from the League, had experience in distributing films, and with the advice of the experts they decided to adapt the film made with images shot in Geneva to make it more interesting for the American audience. This episode is revealing for the Secretariat's communication strategies. From the very start of the League in 1919, it was clear that mobilizing public opinion for its causes was a crucial element for the organization to succeed. At the same time, the Secretariat had to refrain from using "propaganda." This concept was heavily scrutinized at the end of

the First World War, as deceiving the public was seen as one of the causes for the war.

As stated by the guest editors of this Thematic Section, the practices conducted by the League's Information Section have only recently been discovered by academics. Throughout its existence, the first generation of international civil servants tried to establish how an international organization could present itself to the public. They had to decide how to approach the public in the member states and their related territories, which consisted of the majority of the world's population. The officials had little precedent to base their activities on and had to create new channels of communication to start their work. The Information Section had a limited mandate and tended to downplay its activities; it presented itself as a neutral outlet of facts and information. In practice, however, the officials working for the League actively lobbied for the international organization in a variety of ways.

In this article we will see that the balancing act for League officials was especially tricky when using film to promote the international organization. The use of "educational cinematography" was stud-



ied by governments in this period and from early on, the Secretariat recognized that this relatively new mass medium could support international understanding between people. However, the fear to engage with what was considered unwanted propaganda was especially strong with regard to film, as it was it was a medium that potentially reached large audiences and was considered to have manipulative power. As we will see the Secretariat refrained from making its own films until the late 1930s. The handling of film provides a lens on how the Information Section relied on and cooperated with independent civil society organizations, such as the LNA, to circumvent the restrictions put on the Secretariat when it came to promoting the League. Building on the existing literature, I will use the archival documents that reflect on the processes behind the making of films on the League of Nations to reveal the intentions of the makers.

After giving a broader contextualization of the Information Section's activities, we will see how in the 1920s it was the civil society organizations that first experimented with bringing the League into the movie theaters. To understand the techniques that were used, I will discuss the movies *Hell and the Way Out* and *From Violence to Law* released by respectively the American and Dutch League societies. Learning from the civil society organizations and cooperating with them, from the 1930s the Information Section became more active in the field as well. Based on the League of Nations' archives, this story shows that officials kept experimenting with new ways to bring the League's activities into the spotlight, and sometimes tried to move beyond their official mandate. It will also show, however, that the results in this field were limited. The Secretariat's film project came in a time when the political climate had turned against the League. Restrictions came from higher offices, translated into budgetary constraints and limitations on the uses of particular techniques. On top of this, the Information Section was originally focused on targeting elites. The turn to film was made with hesitation, which contributes to explaining why the

Secretariat never successfully used film to convince the masses of the value of the organization.

2 The League's Information Section and public opinion

As part of a general re-evaluation of the role of the League of Nations in interwar international relations, scholars from a variety of disciplines have started to look at the activities of the Secretariat's Information Section (Akami, 2018; Gellrich, Koenen, & Averbeck-Lietz, 2020; Seidenfaden, 2019; Tworek, 2010). The liberal internationalist drafters of the Covenant of the League, such as U.S. president Woodrow Wilson and South African general Jan Smuts believed the League had to mobilize a powerful international public opinion for its support. In the aftermath of the war, they claimed a stable peace could be achieved if the war-averse public got involved to a far greater extent than before and during the First World War. Using this rhetoric, they wanted to create a break with the practices of nation states during the war. A backlash against the use of propaganda occurred in the early interwar period, as the propaganda campaigns of belligerent nations were partly held responsible for the size of the horrors in the war (Ribeiro, Schmidt, Nicholas, Kruglikova, & Du Pont, 2019, p. 105). British and American parliamentary investigations revealed that false messages had widely been spread by their respective governments during the war; the propaganda systems in states such as the U.S., France, Britain and Germany were dismantled (Horne & Kramer, 2001, p. 374).

The League's Information Section was framed as being part of a new, "open" type of diplomacy. The decisions in the League had to be made in a transparent way. Journalists were given access to the meetings of the League Assembly and many committees; Without backdoor politics and with the world watching, governments could be held accountable for their actions (Akami, 2008, p. 107; Hucker, 2020, pp. 24–25; MacMillan, 2001, pp. 93–94). The Infor-

mation Section, in this ideal, only had to make sure the public was well-informed about the work that was going on in Geneva. It, therefore, had no mandate to set up a large propaganda system to influence international public opinion in the member states. In its pamphlet *The League and Public Opinion* from 1931, the Information Section claimed that: “At no time, the League Secretariat can be propagandist.” The section “Like its name indicated”, only distributed *information* “so that the world can form its judgment” (League of Nations Information Section, 1931, p. 10). Reflecting back in 1945, Egon Ranshofen-Wertheimer, former Information Section official and chronicler of the Secretariat, framed it in a similar way: “Propaganda was taboo” (Ranshofen-Wertheimer, 1945, p. 230).

For a long time, scholars have reproduced the image of the Information Section as neutral news outlet, but recently the work of this section has been re-evaluated. It has become clear that this image brought forward by the League itself has to be analyzed critically. The supposedly utopian beliefs of the liberal internationalist have to be nuanced. While official rhetoric implied that the public had to guide statesmen, the liberal internationalists and international civil servants saw an important role for *themselves* in educating the public. Much more than following mass preferences, they strived to educate and influence public opinion, justifying their work by pointing to their moral authority (Hucker, 2020; Wertheimer, 2019). In doing so, they followed the democratic states that reinvented their activities in the interwar period. In order to avoid being accused of conducting propaganda, states downplayed their own activities and talked about “educating” and “informing” their citizens.

With the new scholarship that has been published in the last few years, we can safely conclude that, despite the taboo on propaganda, the officials in the League’s Information Section actively lobbied for the League. Apart from sending out all kinds of information and official publications (Seidenfaden, 2020), the League

officials accommodated the media present in Geneva (Gellrich et al., 2020), they travelled all over the world to explain their work, and installed local information offices (Akami, 2018). The Secretariat closely followed developments in broadcasting and developed a radio system in the 1930s (Potter, 2020, pp. 65–66). The Information Section transmitted broadcasts in English, French and Spanish, reaching audiences in the British Dominions and South America (Lommers, 2012, pp. 152–163). The officials working in the Information Section were almost exclusively former journalists, often primarily working on the relationship with their native country. Much more than a vague, utopian ideal to make the entire world think in a cosmopolitan way, they tried to firmly anchor the international organization in the world order that emerged after the First World War. In this work, they often overstepped the narrow mandate that had been agreed upon by the governments that oversaw the League.

The core part of the strategy of the Information Section was the attempt to mobilize a network containing a large variety of non-state actors. By convincing journalists, politicians, university professors and other public intellectuals, these individuals could make propaganda on behalf of the League. Especially journalists were considered opinion-shapers and were obvious targets to influence. Focusing their activities on elites, the officials believed the League’s message would trickle-down to the rest of society. An important role was also seen for the wide range of League of Nations societies that emerged throughout the interwar period. These organizations were established by civil society actors in at least forty different countries. Much more than the present-day United Nations Associations, these societies often stood in the middle of national public debates on foreign policy issues. Various historians have described their work in specific national contexts (Birebent, 2007; Kuehl & Dunn, 1997; McCarthy, 2011) and on their cooperation in the International Federation of League of Nations Societies (Davies, 2012; Richard, 2020). The largest society was the British

League of Nations Union (LNU). This mass organization played an important role in British civil society. It had hundreds of branches throughout the country and had over 400 000 members in the early 1930s (McCarthy, 2011, pp. 132–133).

Through their ties with national politics the national societies formed an important intermediary between member states and the League of Nations in Geneva, but little research has been done on their cooperation with the Information Section in Geneva. While remaining independent from each other, officials in Geneva understood the advantages of keeping close ties with the organizations that were often backed by wealthy individuals and made active propaganda for the League (Seidenfaden, 2019, p. 81). In my own research I show that Information Section officials actively supported League of Nations societies in various member states. This was not a clearly defined part of the Information Section's strategy, but often depended on initiatives of particular officials. In some countries where activity of civil society actors was limited officials encouraged particular individuals in their network to get organized. In other states, such as the Netherlands and the United States, discussed below, League officials and civil society actors cooperated. In the following sections we will see that the Information Section often relied on the societies to bring the League's message in the cinema theaters.

3 Films on the League in the 1920s

The League's Secretariat engaged with film from early on. The international organization was active in a period in which film became a mass medium, with cinemas drawing large audiences. National governments studied the role cinema could play in educating the youth and the working class (Hung, Hampton, Ortoleva, van Eijnatten, & Weibull, 2019, p. 116); Scholars such as Walter Lippmann debated the influence of images on the human brain (Sluga, 2018, pp. 138–139). The League's Section on Intellectual Cooperation hoped

that film could support international understanding between peoples. Their work resulted in a special organization set up in Rome in 1928, the International Educational Cinematographic Institute (IECI). The institute conducted a variety of activities to support the use of educational films that promoted peaceful international relations. It gathered information on the use of educational films all over the world, promoted the circulation of films by lobbying for lower duty rates and published a journal in five different languages (Druick, 2007; Taillibert, 2020; Wilke, 1991). Zoë Druick (2008, pp. 72–73) argues that the League became a "forum for international discourse about cultural film." All these efforts were focused on fostering knowledge on educational cinematography, however, and the institute did not create any films on the work of the League of Nations. The organization became a kind of think tank, discussing educational cinematography and monitoring its use.

In the context of this article on the way the League communicated its own achievements, it is important to note that, similar to the IECI, the Secretariat did not produce any films of its own until the late 1930s. Because of the surge of the medium, the Information Section discussed the matter from relatively early on, but apart from the bad connotation to propaganda, producing films was also an expensive venture. In this period, the Information Section mostly assisted production companies when they wanted to make recordings at League meetings for the purpose of newsreels. A large number of short clips is available in the UN's online audio-visual library (Seidenfaden, 2019, pp. 98–99; United Nations Audiovisual Library, n.d.).

A first sobering experience occurred when the Secretariat got financially involved in a failed experiment in 1926. A Swiss company was given the rights to film the special Assembly that discussed the German accession to the League, but Secretary General Eric Drummond stopped the film makers from shooting scenes at the last minute, as the deliberations developed less smoothly than expected. Drummond agreed that the Secretariat

had a moral obligation to cover some of the company's losses. This will have set back any ambitions of League officials themselves to shoot material, as Drummond argued: "It is clear that had the League itself undertaken cinematographic arrangements at the Assembly [...] the resultant losses would have been large" (Secretary General, 1926).

In a meeting following this incident, English Information Section member Henri Cummings concluded that it was not viable for the Secretariat to produce successful longer films. Hinting at the taboo on propaganda that existed for the administration's public communication, he argued that it was impossible for the Secretariat to "add the necessary color" to the films which would be necessary to attract large audiences. Judging from a cost-benefit perspective, producing cinematic material in the dry style of the Information Section's written publications was not worth the investment. He claimed: "It would therefore be better to leave the initiative to private organizations. Serious efforts are already conducted by the League of Nations societies" (League of Nations Information Section, 1926). The experiment and the deliberations in 1926 also show that the Information Section was on unfamiliar territory when it came to film. The officials working for the League were all former newspaper journalists and much of their work focused on targeting elites. These individuals lacked the expertise in this field; The strategy of the Information Section was not changed in such a way that it allowed large investments in film.

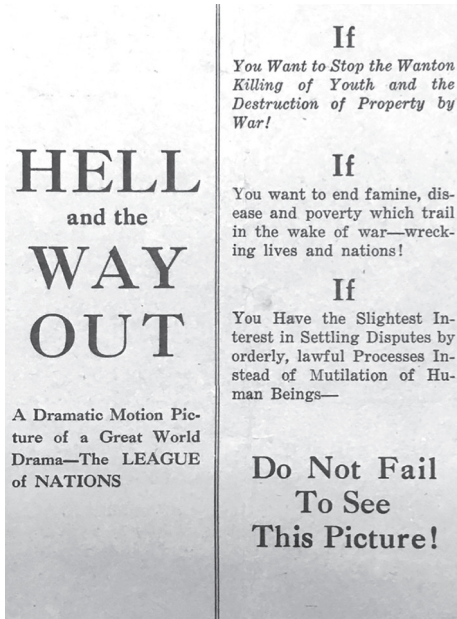
Until well into the 1930s, it was some of the independent League of Nations societies that saw film as an interesting opportunity to showcase the League's activities to large audiences. It is not clear how many films were produced by these societies in this period. It seems likely that it was only feasible for the larger, wealthier societies to be active in this field. Apart from the films discussed here, the author has so far not encountered scripts of other films. Historian Helen McCarthy describes that the British society LNU released two films, *Star of Hope* (1926) and *World War and Af-*

ter (1930), which were shown to over half a million schoolchildren (McCarthy, 2011, pp. 112–113). In this article I focus on two other films that have not surfaced in recent literature so far. An early example is the film *Hell and the Way Out*, which was released in 1925 by the LNA. The U.S. Senate famously did not join the League even though U.S. president Wilson had been one of its architects; this meant that the League movement had a concrete goal to rally for: American accession to the League and to the related international organizations. The LNA grew out to be one of the larger League societies and was backed by wealthy individuals that wanted a less isolationist American foreign policy (Kuehl & Dunn, 1997). The LNA stood in close touch with Secretariat officials, most notably the resourceful American Arthur Sweetser of the Information Section (Löhr & Herren, 2014), and organized a large variety of activities, with branches active in all states.

In 1925, the association hired the services of James K. Shields, a movie director who had gained most of his experience creating movies for evangelical audiences (Parker & Lindvall, 2012, p. 32). In cooperation with employees of the LNA he developed *Hell and the Way Out*. The film lasted thirty-five minutes, but unfortunately only a flyer and the script have survived. In the first fifteen minutes Shields portrayed a dramatic turn of events – Hell – in which two former school friends, American Charles Keith and German Max Huber, find each other on opposite sides of the trenches in 1917. In the latter part – The Way Out – the film meticulously displayed the workings of the League. Using maps and animations, the director accentuated the absence of the United States. Shields discussed the first five years of the League's activities, describing some of the conflicts it had resolved. One of these conflicts was the Corfu incident, a dispute between Italy and Greece in 1923 started by the murder of an Italian general on Greek territory (Tollardo, 2016, p. 4). Despite the fact that fascist Italy taunted the League in this crisis, the aftermath was presented as a success for the organization. Some intertitles read: "Even the fiery dictator Mussolini

could not withstand the moral protest of this much of the world” (Shields, 1925, p. 15). In the final scene the accession of the U.S. to the League was predicted, with Uncle Sam dealing a final blow to the symbolic God of War (Shields, 1925, p. 20).

Figure 1: A flyer for *Hell and the Way Out*



Source: LNA (1925).

The movie premiered at a dinner organized by the LNA to commemorate the sixth anniversary of the League. Several copies of the film were sent all across the country to local branches of the LNA (League of Nations Association, 1926, p. 8). Archival sources help us reconstruct how the organization tried to maximize the effect of the film in various states. Florence Kitchelt, director of the branch in Connecticut, used the movie to launch a considerable campaign, which lasted over a year (Sluga, 2013, pp. 64, 72). After a successful screening at Yale University in March 1926, the branch organized smaller viewings in all kinds of venues, but also convinced commercial theaters to show a shorter version of the film. In these theaters the movie was paired with highly anticipated Hollywood movies, and *Hell*

and *the Way Out* was shown several times a day. The branch claimed that after seven days of screenings in this type of theaters, 30 000 people in Connecticut had seen the movie (Kitchelt, 1927, p. 1). The branch made sure to have a group of volunteers ready to hand out leaflets at every showing. In every town the LNA had set up a committee of prominent local people that supported the League. The movie and this list of people were announced in the local press long before the screening. Kitchelt commented on this strategy: “Just to show the film is not enough. It is important to rouse a town to the fact that it is coming, so that people who are thinking along international lines may have a chance to go.” At the end of the campaign, she claimed, 70 000 Connecticuters had seen *Hell and the Way Out* (Kitchelt, 1927, p. 3). The national association reported that the movie was still screened a few hundred times in the second year of its existence and in 1930 the movie was updated and released for new screenings. The copies owned by the LNA were used especially for screenings at schools.

In the Netherlands, the lively League movement released a similar movie in 1926 and it is useful to compare this film to *Hell and the Way Out*. The Dutch state had remained neutral during the First World War, but with an eye on retaining its overseas colonies in South-East Asia and the Caribbean, the Netherlands became a relatively willing member of the League. The influential civil society actors that started the Vereeniging voor Volkenbond en Vrede [VeV, The Society for the League of Nations and Peace], made the organization into the most influential organization focused on foreign affairs in the Netherlands in this period (Richard, 2018, p. 102). The VeV developed various periodicals, but in the mid-1920s it also started experimenting with film. Using its influential network, the director of the society was able to commission Willy Mullens, a pioneer in the Dutch cinema world, to produce a movie on the workings of the League (Hogenkamp, 2016, p. 22).

The film *Van Geweld tot Recht* [From Violence to Law] can be reconstructed

with a pamphlet that included the script and some stills of the film (*Volkenbond en Vrede*, 1926). Similar to the American film, the scenario was a mixture of a fiction and a documentary. In the fictional part, the Dutch League society was clear about the message it wanted to portray. A grandfather talked to his middle-class family on Christmas eve about the horrors the past war had brought onto people in other countries: “I will not raise you for war ... You will fight for a different world: peace” (*Volkenbond en Vrede*, 1926, p. 1). Before showing the League and its Secretariat in Geneva, the director tried to appeal to his audience by claiming that the Dutch had played a large role in the history of international law and peaceful international relations. The grandfather described the pioneering work of Hugo Grotius in the seventeenth century and discussed the history of the Hague Peace Conferences in 1899 and 1907, the Permanent Court of Arbitration and the Dutch anti-war movement. In the second part of the film the activities of the League were portrayed. The VeV showed pictures of the League’s mandated territories and post-war Vienna, where a Dutch official had led the League’s attempts to stabilize the Austrian economy after the war (Clavin, 2014). The last part of the film showed “the fruits of the new spirit,” consisting of jurisprudence, safety and disarmament, all products from agreements that were made in Geneva. In the final scene, the important role of public opinion is portrayed, and the society tried to actively mobilize its cinema audience. The grandfather urged his grandson to sign up to the VeV and intertitles read: “The League of Nations is powerless without the support of the public opinion [...] That public opinion consists of you, spectator!” (*Volkenbond en Vrede*, 1926, p. 23).

The film project was considered a success. It premiered in The Hague in February 1926, with various influential politicians and diplomats attending the event. The movie received positive reviews in the major newspapers. *Algemeen Handelsblad* claimed that the film successfully tried to show how “every individual, just by showing their interest, could contrib-

Figure 2: A still of the film *Van Geweld tot Recht* (1926)



Note: Published in a pamphlet of the VeV (1926). As no copy of the film exists today anymore, it is one of the few visual remnants of the film.

ute to building a sustainable peace” (Een film over den Volkenbond, 1926). The film toured through the country throughout 1926, with members of the VeV often opening the film with a lecture. Local sections of the League society showed the film in eighteen Dutch cities, but independent cinemas rented the film as well. In the following years the film was updated after Germany had joined the League and was shown in many more Dutch cities (*Volkenbond en Vrede*, 1927, p. 19)

Some important similarities are visible between *Hell and The Way Out* and *From Violence to Law*. In both films the documentary element, discussing the activities and accomplishments of the League, was supplemented with a fictional story to make the film more appealing to the cinema audience. Both the LNA and the VeV often sent members to screenings to provide a lecture with the silent movies. The fictional characters in both Mullens’ as Shield’s films had experienced the First World War and made an appeal to convince the audience that a future war had to be avoided at all costs. It was these attempts to invoke emotions that separated the efforts of the League’s societies from the possibilities of the officials in the Information Section in Geneva, who considered this type of communication incompatible with the League’s pledge to abstain from

propaganda. The directors also tailored their message to their respective national audiences. Mullens tapped into the Dutch pride for its supposed contributions to the development of international law and tried to accentuate the central role of The Hague as city of international law. Shields tried to show his viewers that it was a disgrace that the United States was not part of the League. Joining the League would mean that the organization had a much larger chance of success, the LNA argued. The funds and manpower these societies had to adapt their message to the national audiences were unavailable to the Secretariat in Geneva.

4 The Information Section creating its own film

In the 1930s the political and financial climate worsened dramatically for the League. The optimism felt in anticipation of the large World Disarmament Conference (1932–1934) was not followed up by results and the collective security system failed in conflicts involving member states, first at the Manchurian crisis and later in the war between Italy and Ethiopia. Member states, hit by the Great Depression, reduced their funding to the League and the Information Section's budget was cut drastically (Ranshofen-Wertheimer, 1945, pp. 28–31; Seidenfaden, 2019, pp. 136–138). With the budget cut the taboo on propaganda was reiterated as well; the Information Section was ordered to keep its activities to the bare minimum. At the same time, its members understood that they could not rely on the "old" media alone. The archives of the League contain large files on how the Secretariat could become active in this field. Secretariat officials requested the script *From Violence to Law* and corresponded with members of the American societies, to check whether they would in theory be interested to circulate official League material.

In 1932, the Secretariat hosted a meeting with film experts and representatives of League of Nations societies to study how the production of educational films

on the League could be encouraged. The Information Section submitted a report in which it discussed the potential values and dangers attached to the Secretariat producing films, in which they distinguished fiction, documentary and animated films (League of Nations Information Section, 1932). The overreaching conclusion at that moment was, however, that the Information Section could not fund these activities itself. It meant that in the ten years following *Hell and The Way Out* and *From Violence to Law*, the Secretariat had not followed up on the experiments of civil society actors. In 1937, Australian Information Section official Hessel Duncan Hall gave a damning report:

The Secretariat has so far had very little experience in making, and still less in distributing films on the League. These [few existing, author] films consist of several patch-work films, built up from newsreel material which has been used on special occasions by members of the Secretariat. No general attempt appears to have been made to circulate them. And in fact, they were not of sufficiently high quality or general interest to make it possible for them to be used. (Duncan Hall, 1937)

The lack of films was the result of the hesitation of the League officials discussed above. In the same period, however, the Secretariat started to act. The financial issues remained for the entire 1930s, but later discussions show the Information Section became more eager and creative to overcome this problem. In 1936 the Information Section director, Dutchman Adriaan Pelt, undertook serious steps to create films for the League. In September 1936, he met with Margery Locket, educational director of the Gaumont-British film company, to set in motion the production of short educational films. In a revealing statement, he showed that he tried to find a creative way to get around the public taboo on propaganda. Pelt told Locket that "the watchword is: no direct propaganda, even if it be only remotely connected with League work." The cooperation had to be "of the closest possible nature, but unofficial" (Pelt, 1936). The film had to show the

League had agreed to the content, but not that it had been part in producing it. The proposed content was fairly direct, in a way that did not match the public image of a neutral and passive Information Section. The introduction to the scenario created by Pelt and Gaumont argued that the core of the films

[s]hould be based on the main general idea that confusion, unhappiness, and disaster follow from the refusal of man to submit himself to the rule of law and to cooperate for this purpose. It is this general idea that must form the basis, whether the film deals with health work, the campaign against dangerous drugs [...] or whatever the subject is. (Pelt, 1936)

With this scenario, the League tried to convince the audience that the international organization could prevent disaster from happening. The cooperation with Gaumont showed that Pelt was exploring the boundaries of the mandate that his Section was given. By not crediting the movie to the Information Section, he believed it could use more outspoken techniques.

In the end, however, the short unofficial films were not produced. One possible explanation is that Pelt did not have the necessary support for this “unofficial” strategy. Instead, the Assembly and higher offices in the Secretariat finally encouraged the Information Section to make its own film. As a consequence, however, the content of the new film had to fit into the rules set for the Section. A film that “brought out a certain ideological conception of the League would evidently rank as propaganda,” and therefore they had to focus instead on films that “should be informative [sic!] and should describe the manner in which the League works” (Secretary General, 1937, p. 8). In the same year, Information Section officials therefore set everything in motion to create what would be the only lengthy talkie on the League: the documentary *The League at Work*. Because of the budget constraints, the eventual film became a cooperation between different actors. The British and American League of Nations societies

committed to buy copies of the film and American philanthropist James J. Forstall loaned out the rest of the necessary budget, with the condition that the Secretariat committed to repay this loan with the other copies it would sell (Secretary General, 1938, pp. 3–4).

The film was produced by the Realist Film Unit (RFU) of the British General Post Office. The background of this organization fit well with what the Information Section was looking for. The public relations department of the postal company had built up a name making documentary films for the British government. John Grierson, a famous Scottish documentary maker and head of the Film Unit, was an important pioneer for how the democratic state conducted a form of propaganda during the interwar period (Grant, 1994, pp. 18–20). Grierson and his Brazilian colleague Alberto Cavalcanti, in charge of directing the League’s film, had experience in displaying internationalism, shooting other films for the RFU in Geneva in the same period (Aitken, 2013, p. 668).

The Information Section was involved in creating the scenario. Pelt asked the directors of all the Sections in the Secretariat to submit a summary of the work of the Section:

It is, of course, left entirely to your discretion as to what you care to say about the work of your Section, but you are asked to bear in mind that any special point of interest, i.e., a successful achievement should be referred to. (Pelt, 1937)

In the film, available online and recently studied by other scholars, the viewer travelled through the Secretariat’s offices (Strandgaard Jensen, Schulz, & Seidenfaden, 2019; United Nations Audiovisual Library, n. d.). The film was, in contrast to the ones of the League societies, fully non-fiction; Section directors explained their work and images of the League’s buildings were alternated by pictures, maps and statistics. In this part, the directors clearly stayed very close to the rules set to the section. Frank Walters, head of the Political Section, listed eight major conflicts his

section tried to deal with, while the Information Section displayed a wide variety of pamphlets and discussed its radio broadcasts. The representative of the Opium Advisory Committee explained the exchange of information had helped governments and boasted that the exports in the major drugs heroine, morphine and cocaine had been halved in seven years' time.

Figure 3: Edouarde Rodolphe de Haller, director of the Mandates Section in front of a map of the League mandates in Africa.



Source: League of Nations Information Section (1937).

In the introduction of the film the viewer is shown a cemetery with victims of First World War. The voice-over states: "Here's the League of Nations at work. Judge it for yourselves" (Information Section, 1937, 1:42). In this message, much of the Secretariat film policy comes together. By giving the audience the option to judge the work of the League for themselves, the directors tried to comply with the ban on propaganda. In the – successful – attempt to convince the British Secretary of State Anthony Eden to make a short speech to be included in the movie, the Information Section once again confirmed this policy. A Section official told the British delegation:

I should like to make it quite clear that this film is only propagandist in nature in so far as it will show the actual activities of the League. The utmost care [...] will be taken to exclude all political elements of a nature to upset any particular State [...]. The film is designed, in

fact, to be purely informative. (Information Section official, 1937)

By asking the viewer to judge the organization for themselves, it is clear the tone of the League's film was considerably different from the claims made by the VeV and the LNA, as these organizations tried to mobilize their viewers in a more active way. At the same time, by showing some of the League's accomplishments and reminding everyone of the horrors of the First World War, the viewer could only be expected to come to the conclusion that the League was an essential factor in creating a stable world order.

The release of the movie led to a serious campaign in the Summer of 1937 to bring the League into the public eye. The Information Section had multiple copies in its possession, both with French and English narration. The Secretariat sent four copies to the Paris World's Fair of 1937, attended by millions of visitors, where it was displayed in the general Peace Pavilion. Two copies were used in Geneva as part of the guided tours to the buildings of the League, where over one hundred thousand visitors saw the films in the first year of its existence (League of Nations Information Section, 1938). Individual Secretariat members also brought the film on their travels abroad, where they would show it to audiences in the member states.

More important than the use by the Secretariat was the campaign to distribute it amongst League of Nations societies. The British LNU had multiple copies and advertised the possibility to rent it out to its local branches. Together with the other films shot by the RFU the branches had the possibility to have "an attractive and profitable evening" (Garnett, 1937). As mentioned in the introduction, the American LNA gathered funds to adapt the film by Hollywood experts, in order to make it more appealing for an American audience. In their version, the endeavors of U.S. president Wilson and American senators that had tried to bring the United States into the League were accentuated. The success of this American release is unclear. The Dutch society also made

creative use of the copy they bought together with a cinema entrepreneur. After having added Dutch subtitles, the film toured thirteen cities and was shown over five hundred times (Volkenbond en Vrede, 1938, p. 17). In his correspondence with the Information Section the director of the VeV argued that it was a rare opportunity for the society to reach the “mass audiences” that came to the movie theaters. He claimed that: “When we organize normal film nights with our society, only a few hundred show up; in this case we are reaching the large cinema audience.” He concluded therefore, that “it is excellent propaganda to show the film in ordinary cinemas and not only at the [VeV’s] meetings” (Van der Mandere, 1938). The secretary of the society was excited about this collaborative action between the VeV and the Secretariat.

The Dutch reviews of the Secretariat’s film varied. Liberal newspaper *Het Vaderland* was surprised that “the real meaning of the League is barely made explicit.” The editor criticized the artistic choices of the Secretariat and the film director: “a bit more passion, a bit more persuasiveness would not have been out of place” (J.H., 1938, p. 13). Nevertheless, in his communication with the Secretariat, Van der Mandere was happy to forward positive newspaper articles. In one of these, *Het Volksblad* echoed the intentions of the VeV and the Secretariat with the display of this late-1930s movie: “Young and old should visit the City cinema to regain strength for their own mental resilience, to shake off the fatal misconception: ‘It won’t work anyway’” (Het Volksblad, 1938).

These reviews already showed that the film was no unanimous success. The experiences of the various societies made clear that it was complicated to create a uniform film that could be displayed in all member states of the League. Societies working in countries in which French or English was not the lingua franca had to find a way to make the audience understand the film. The experience of the American society shows that a lack of national context was also considered an obstacle; The films created by the LNA and the VeV in the 1920s

showed that these societies often tried to adapt the general League’s message to the context of their own society. The lack of budget and the price tag attached to the film also hampered the success of the film. The Information Section aimed to earn back the money invested in this project and was therefore not able to honor requests by League societies in South Africa, Egypt, and Austria to send copies free of charge. It can be considered a missed opportunity. With a larger budget to distribute the film, League societies across the world could have displayed the film.

The Information Section tried to continue its activities in this field in the last years of the 1930s, but, also because of the increasingly unstable international situation, it never managed to create a coherent policy regarding to film. In 1938, it received a budget to organize a prize competition; Amateur screenwriters were invited to come up with a scenario for a new film. The result of this competition was disappointing. The jury, consisting of film experts, considered none of the submissions worthy of the first prize and “was struck by the indifferent character of most of the scenario’s” (League of Nations Information Section, 1938). One of the jury members complained to Deputy Secretary General Sean Lester that the competition was not interesting for professional screenwriters and thought that the prize money was too low for amateurs to be able to participate seriously. The jury suggested that the Information Section should work together with a selected professional to create a satisfying result (League of Nations Information Section, 1938). The fact that this exact procedure was used to make *The League at Work* the year before shows that budgetary constraints and lack of streamlined cooperation between the Secretariat and the Assembly hindered the Information Section in making larger films in the last years before the war. It shows the Secretariat did not create a uniform strategy on film throughout the interwar period.

5 Conclusion

In 1937, the Secretary General explained to the League's Assembly one of the major challenges international organizations encounter when trying to get their achievements on the big screen: "The League is under the disadvantage of having to produce films which are not designed to be shown in any particular country, but which are capable of being shown in many countries" (League of Nations Information Section, 1938). It showed the Secretariat still had not found a sound strategy in this field. The use of film by international organizations accelerated during and after the Second World War (Sluga, 2018). The funds invested in projects like these increased rapidly. Nevertheless, the very nature of these organizations dictates that a taboo on propaganda remained an issue of concern also for organizations such as the European Union and NATO nowadays (Clemens, 2016; Risso, 2014, pp. 8–9).

The images displayed in *The League at Work* correspond well with the recent literature on how the League wanted to portray itself. In theory, by showing the activities of the League in Geneva, the public would be convinced that the only way to a stable world order was with the League at the center of it. The success of the film was however limited. Throughout the interwar period, the Information Section had trouble creating a proactive strategy for film. It missed the opportunity to use this medium to target mass audiences. This article has also shown the importance of taking into account the cooperation between the Secretariat and the League of Nations societies. Though in theory independent, the actors in these organizations had similar goals, closely cooperated with League officials, and often used their deeper pockets too. Without the cooperation of these societies, *The League at Work* could not have been financed. They had their own network and stood closer to the publics in the member states. In their own films, such as *Hell and the Way Out* and *From Violence to Law*, the societies used more engaging techniques. They tried to mobilize the public by making an emotional ap-

peal and by tailoring their message to the preferences of the national audiences. The activities of these societies and their cooperation with Geneva are important to fully understand the League's communication strategy.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the organizers of the conference "Communication History of International Organizations and NGOs" held at the University of Bremen in November 2019, as well as the anonymous reviewers of SComS for their helpful comments.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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