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## **'The feeling of pursuing an ideal':**

### **A League of Nations civil servant reflects upon his work**

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**ABSTRACT** : Three decades before the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the international community, in its newly institutionalised guise as a League of Nations, was charged by its covenant to guarantee the rights and protections of a more limited number of people: those considered to be 'persons belonging to minorities of race, religion or language' within a number of primarily eastern European states who had signed minorities treaties or agreements. The everyday work of 'supervising' the minorities treaties was carried out by newly recruited members of an entirely unprecedented genre of administration: an international civil service whose role was to support the League of Nations in all its various activities. This article draws on unpublished interviews from 1965 and 1966, archival documents, and first-person retrospective accounts in which international civil servants describe and reflect upon their work on minorities treaty supervision in the new international institution widely seen as an 'experiment'. Focussing on the accounts of one important figure, the Spaniard Pablo de Azcárate, who served in the Administrative Commissions and Minorities Questions Section of the League of Nations Secretariat from 1922-1933, it explores the ethos, aspirations, frustrations and working practices of international civil servants in an institution still in formation and not yet fully bureaucratised.

**KEYWORDS**: bureaucracy, supervision, minorities, League of Nations, international

...Though the work that would subsequently have to be done was irksome, he enjoyed his first contact with a file. He liked tracing its fate and following its peregrinations in the minutes sheets attached to the left inside cover where one colleague after another had noted brief views for each other. He liked rooting out the ironies, acrimonies and hostilities which lurked beneath the polite phrasing, and even, and this was a refinement of pleasure, detecting and savouring what he called Dirty Tricks or Stabs-in-the-Back. In a word, the arrival of a new batch of files, no sooner on his desk than avidly perused, brought him a whiff of the world outside and was always a stimulating event, a distraction, a diversion....When he had finished reading file number four, he treated himself to the liberty of adding to the handwritten comment in the margin of the minute-sheet, next to a grammatical mistake perpetrated by an A-grade colleague, an anonymous and vengeful exclamation mark. He closed the file and sighed. That's the nice part over.

Albert Cohen, *Belle du Seigneur* (p. 41)

What do we know about international civil servants, the people who inhabited that entirely novel category of person who staffed the Secretariat of the 'experiment' (Cecil 1941) in internationality that was the League of Nations? In his character Adrien Deume, whose voice we hear above, the novelist Albert Cohen gives us an ineffectual, comically narcissistic social climber more concerned with his promotion

to A-grade than with the bureaucratic correspondence landing on his desk. A Corfiote Jew raised in Marseilles and educated in Geneva, Cohen worked for decades as an international civil servant at the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Geneva-based sister organisation to the League of Nations. His classic novel, *Belle du Seigneur*, vividly describes the introverted, status conscious and anti-Semitic cosmopolitanism of an international Geneva that Cohen knew at first hand.

By contrast, the Australian novelist Frank Moorhouse offers us another League type. In his novels, *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace* (Moorhouse 1993, 2000), Moorhouse bases his main character, Edith Campbell Berry, on the enterprising Canadian internationalist and League of Nations Information Section staff member Mary McGeachy. Highly regarded as a press officer, translator and liaison with international women's organisations yet chronically under-rewarded because of being female, McGeachy remained passionate about and loyal to the League, criss-crossing Canada in the 1930s on 'missions' delivering lectures to inform the Canadian public about its vision (Kinnear 2004, 78–86). The fictional Berry—earnest, plucky and adventurous, the daughter of a freethinking Quaker Australian family—is similarly inspired by the internationalist vision of creating a truly peaceful world and desperately wants to be a part of this project. She joins the League of Nations Secretariat as a spirited though unworldly idealist, and in the course of an absorbing, tragicomic coming-of-age story, gradually discovers the complexities of trying to act internationally and the inevitable disappointments.

These fictional characters bring to life one element in the bubbling energies of 'international Geneva': its newly created international civil service, the 'genuinely

transnational officialdom' that was the League's 'beating heart' (Pedersen 2007, 1112). They alert us to the daring novelty of constructing, at the apogee of nationalisms a full century ago, a Secretariat that was 'an international body instead of a conglomerate of national offices' (Madariaga 1973, 101). This is not common knowledge: the taint of 'failure' surrounding the League of Nations, held responsible for 'failing' to prevent a second world war, strengthened the 'realist' hegemony that dismissed its international project tout court as hopelessly idealistic and utopian, and most scholars subsequently ignored it as irrelevant. Since the mid-1990s, however, the demise of a bi-polar world, the emergence of new nationalist and communitarian movements and a turn to international administration of so-called 'failed states', from Kosovo to East Timor, have prompted a spate of reassessments of League precedents (Pedersen 2007; Cowan 2007a). These are addressing not only the League itself, but also the key political ideas that underpinned it, particularly 'internationalism' in its multiple varieties (including liberal, imperialist, Marxist, socialist, Fabian) and the various possible relationships between internationalism and nationalism that one discerns at this interwar moment (Iriye 1989; Rupp 1997; Sluga 2013; Sluga and Clavin 2017). Looking beyond its complex synergies with (primarily) European nationalisms, scholars are increasingly reconsidering League internationalism in relation to Great Power imperialism (Manela 2007; Mazower 2009; Morefield 2005), often with a focus on the mandates system (Anghie 2004; Pedersen 2015; Wheatley 2015; White 2011). But there is also a nascent shift away from the previously overwhelming attention to the acts of statesmen and toward the activities of the Secretariat who were quietly developing everyday methods of international oversight, coordination and cooperation, setting the foundations for

the UN agencies which followed (Balinska 1998; Clavin 2013; Cowan 2003, 2008, 2013; Herren and Löhr 2018; Pernet 2014).

This article extends our understanding of the experiences of the still understudied professional functionaries of interwar international institutions, but also offers historical depth to recent explorations of the practices and experiences of staff in the secretariats of contemporary international organisations (Billaud 2015; Halme-Tuomisaari 2018; Muller 2013). Simultaneously, this analysis shares common concerns with a 'new anthropology of bureaucracy' that draws attention to state bureaucrats' investment in pursuing, redefining or remaking the 'public good' (Bear and Mathur 2015; see also Anders 2010; Bear 2015; Best 2012; Mathur 2015). If the pioneering work on the affective life of the state has delineated with particular insight the ambivalence bureaucrats may feel toward the state they serve (Babül 2017; Laszczkowski and Reeves 2018; Navaro-Yashin 2006, 2012) I follow here the lead of the subject of my case-study. Emotionally invested in a project that was utopian not only in its goal (to promote peace) but in its ways of working (that assumed that acting internationally as a collective body was practicable), his narrative emphasises optimism, hope and serene pragmatism over cynicism.

### **An anthropologist is directed to the archives**

What led me to these international civil servants in the first place? I had conducted anthropological fieldwork from 1983-85 in Sohos (Cowan 1990), a small town northeast of Thessaloniki in northern Greece, many of whose inhabitants spoke, in

addition to Greek, a language that they called—with varying degrees of circumlocution (Hart 2006)—‘ours’ [our language] (τα δικά μας, naš), ‘the local language’ (τα ντόπια), Slavika (Σλαβικά), ‘Bulgarian but not the real Bulgarian’ (Βουλγαρικά αλλά όχι η επίσημη γλώσσα) or, occasionally, Macedonian (makedonski, μακεδονικά, see Cowan 1997a).<sup>1</sup> Despite this non-Greek second language, townspeople often insisted ‘we are not a minority’, explaining that the town had ‘always been Greek’ and recalling the participation of male ancestors on the ‘Greek side’ of the early twentieth century Macedonian Struggle. Such explanations simplified a more complex history; indeed, over time, inconvenient though vague facts sporadically emerged in certain discussions, for instance, that ‘a few’ men had fought on the ‘Bulgarian side’ and that some families ‘a long time ago’ had left the town to settle in Bulgaria. When in 1996 I shared with a Greek historian friend my frustration that published local histories made no mention of any element of Bulgarian identification in Sohos, he urged me to visit the League of Nations Archives in Geneva to search for traces of Sohoian families who might have opted to emigrate to Bulgaria in the 1920s under the auspices of the Greco-Bulgarian Voluntary and Reciprocal Emigration (Cowan 2008; Ladas 1932; Kontogiorgi 2006).

In a preliminary two-week visit to the archives in 1996, I eventually found a trace of 16 household applications from Sohos to emigrate to Bulgaria, yet in the process I discovered an even more intriguing phenomenon: an intense, cacophonous international engagement at the site of the League of Nations around persons labelled in League files as ‘les minorités bulgares’ living in the region of Macedonia, now divided between four countries. Diplomats, revolutionaries, humanitarians,



feminists, internationalists and a wide range of civic associations all assertively and disputatiously concerned themselves with these people's plight. Protected by minorities agreements signed by Greece and the Serbo-Croat-Slovene Kingdom and also by Bulgaria with respect to the Neuilly Protocol,<sup>2</sup> their 'nationality' (in a 'racial' or ethnic sense) was nonetheless an issue of perpetual claim and counter-claim. They might be identified as Bulgarian Macedonians, Macedonians, South Serbians, Bulgarophone Greeks or Slavophone Greeks: each writer privileged the criterion of nationality most advantageous to her or his national cause (be it language, race, religion or national consciousness). Not surprisingly, 'the' nationality and language of this population remained contested and unresolved in the interwar period. This was the situation to which the Minorities Section was called upon respond in their everyday practices of 'supervision' of the minorities treaties.

### **Archival traces plus oral histories**

My discussion draws on my own research in the League of Nations Archives in Geneva on the everyday working practices at the League Secretariat, and on published secondary sources. My principal source, nonetheless, is a lively and relatively underused transcription of a set of five interviews, in French, with individuals who had worked on what were deemed 'minorities questions' within or for the League of Nations.<sup>3</sup> Under the auspices of the European Centre of the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, the international relations and politics scholar, Jean Siotis, conducted tape-recorded interviews on 19th February, 9th

March and 7th April 1965 with three highly placed League civil servants: the Spaniard Pablo de Azcárate y Flórez, Member of Section and later Director of the Administrative Commissions and Minorities Questions Section (often abbreviated to 'Minorities Questions Section' or simply, 'Minorities Section', in internal communications) of the League of Nations Secretariat from 1922-33, who later served as the League's Deputy Secretary General from 1933-36; the Swiss Edouard de Haller, who among other positions had been in 1923-1926 Secretary General to the Mixed Commission of the Greek-Turkish compulsory population exchange that the League of Nations had overseen; and the Dutchman Willem van Asch van Wijk, a Member of the Minorities Section from 1930-1933 (Siotis 1965). A year later, on 22 and 26 March 1966, the political scientist George Coddling interviewed Pablo de Azcárate (Coddling 1966).

Azcárate is the central interlocutor in the interviews: he is interviewed several times on his own (by each of the two scholars) whereas in the group interviews, he speaks at greater length than the others, who frequently defer to him on matters concerning the minorities regime. Although an ordinary Member of Section until 1931, when he became Director (upon the promotion of the previous Director, the charismatic and influential Norwegian Erik Colban, to head the Disarmament Section), Azcárate was for me already a familiar figure in the archival files (Cowan 2003). He also wrote a first-person account describing the functioning of the minorities regime (Azcárate 1945). Due to reasons of space, the article focuses on Azcárate's representations. I draw on the various accounts neither to defend nor to criticise his, or the League's, approach to minorities: assessing this is a much more

complex task than can be undertaken in this brief article. My purpose is different: I wish to explore what the accounts reveal about the visions, aspirations and disappointments, as well as the working practices, of an international civil servant working in an institution that aimed to end war and facilitate a 'permanent peace'. I hope to consider some broad aspects of the ethos, strategy, practice and, not least, the 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977) that such labours entailed.

The interviews of 1965 and 1966 offered an opportunity for these former League of Nations officials to engage in a vivid dialogue with the interviewer, as well as with each other, about specific events and ongoing themes concerning the League of Nations, as well as about general attitudes, policies and working practices within the Secretariat. Occurring some thirty years after the end of their tenures at the League, the discussions must, of course, be read through the lens of a 'critical' oral history. From the work of the historian Alessandro Portelli (1991), among others, we know how important is the awareness that time and current preoccupations can reshape memory. This is over and above the kinds of distortions and ellipses that inevitably creep in as interviewees are asked to summarize practices that evolved over two decades. At the same time, the interviewees' retrospective reflections enable for us—a full half century after the interviews were conducted—a relatively rare glimpse of key actors' explicitly articulated understandings, logics, motivations and feelings about their work, as those were generated by the dialogical context of the interview situations.

I read this interview material alongside archival records, some lectures and articles of the time (Kershaw 1929; Mair 1928; Rosting 1923) and texts produced nearer to

the end of the League's institutional life (Azcárate 1945; Colban 1944; Ranshofen-Wertheimer 1945). Although the five interviews are wide-ranging, I focus here on interventions and reflections on three interrelated themes. First, I look at Azcárate's discussion of the thrill of 'pursuing an ideal' and participating in the larger project of building an 'international spirit'. Second, I present his defence of a pragmatic approach to minority protection that did not succumb to 'Quixotic humanitarianism'. Finally, I draw out the attempts by Azcárate and his colleagues to navigate flexibly and creatively between 'the law' and politics: as I characterise it, to move between 'punctilious proceduralism' and 'principled improvisation'.

### **Pursuing an ideal, building an international spirit**

George Coddling (GC) began his first interview with Pablo de Azcárate (PA) with questions about recruitment.<sup>4</sup> When he probed—perhaps prematurely for a first interview—'were there never problems with your colleagues in the Minorities Section?' (PA: 'No, never.')

and then, 'No personnel problems in the Secretariat?' Azcárate replied:

PA: In all sections, it was rare. There was a judicial committee ('comité judiciare') of which I was a member and later president.

GC: For personnel problems?

PA: Yes, for disciplinary problems.

GC: But there were few of these?

PA: Yes, it was very rare.

GC: Really? That's interesting.

PA: There were few problems of discipline among personnel. First, because, it's what we've just been talking about: the recruitment. It was done with such care. One took people who were very reliable, more or less intelligent, more or less capable, but in the end, that's something else. There were exceptions, but as a whole, in the Secretariat, there was a spirit of initiative, a feeling of dedicating ourselves to a task, of trying to accomplish a mission....And then, there was something else, a feeling of having broken with the past, of pursuing an ideal by taking part in a really new enterprise whose truly formidable goal was to ensure the peace. One has to realise that, at that moment, no one knew what would happen later. Today, it is hard to imagine that feeling ('état d'esprit'). In 1926, 1927, in 1930, we truly thought we were going to be able to preserve the peace. And this gave us enormous satisfaction. (Coddling interview, 22 March 1966)

The sense of breaking with the past and experiencing the spirit of initiative aimed toward the mission of peace through this 'really new enterprise' was allied with another motivating ideal: the 'international spirit'. Like many of his League colleagues and other contemporaries, Azcárate was intrigued by this notion and its obvious importance (Kennedy 1987; Ranshofen-Wertheimer 1945; Rupp 1997). He noted that Sir Eric Drummond and Jean Monnet had built up the Secretariat through

carefully recruiting individuals and incorporating them into 'this same [international] spirit'. When Coddington asked him, 'Did you recruit people who were straightforwardly internationalists?', Azcárate admitted he had not himself done this initially. He then recounted an incident where his Polish colleague, Dr Rajchman, heading the Hygiene Section, treated as completely self-evident the fact that, even when recruiting for a 'technical' position where technical expertise was required, a 'well-established international spirit' was the most important quality.<sup>5</sup> Azcárate confessed that it was at this moment that he realised the importance of the idea.

Azcárate also acknowledged that the 'decline' of this international spirit had occurred even before the shift from Drummond to Avenol as League Secretary General;<sup>6</sup> he remarked that when Germany entered the Secretariat<sup>7</sup>, the German government began to ask its nationals to convey information, who then put pressure on their colleagues to provide it, breaking the Secretariat's solidarity:

There was a German placed in the Political Section—very nice, a good friend—but often I had to say to him, 'Listen, I'm sorry, but I can't give you those files, or talk to you about this question.' He wanted to know everything regarding this or that question in Rumania, and above all, where there were German minorities, in Poland, or Upper Silesia, or Poznanie. As soon as I would say this, he would telegraph Berlin and say, 'they won't let me see the files!' But it was inevitable and one couldn't do anything about it. This lowered the level. It made others anxious. (Coddington interview, 22 March 1966)

In such an environment, although generally disapproving of the German government's approach, the Minorities Section might occasionally use this channel cunningly to convey information from the League to Germany that couldn't be communicated officially:

PA: I remember a case in which I said [to a German colleague]: 'I'm going to tell you something, but it is exclusively for you. (It was about Upper Silesia). I must tell you this, but you must keep this to yourself. We are good friends, I trust you.' What I wanted was that he communicated this to his government.

JS: Did he do it for sure?

PA: He did it five minutes afterwards. I couldn't say to him, 'listen, I'm going to tell you this [information], go and repeat it!' (Siotis interview, 19 February 1965)

However, Azcárate stressed that the passing of information by Secretariat personnel to their government was not the only contentious issue; more egregiously in his view, the German government sometimes also tried to influence Minorities Section decisions. He explains how, once the German diplomat Albert Dufour-Feronce, 'who would follow German minority issues very closely', had been installed as Under-Secretary General in 1927, he (Azcárate) sometimes found himself chastised regarding the minorities petition procedure. As he explained: if someone from a German minority community [i.e. in one of the treaty-bound states] complained to the German government that such and such a petition had been declared

irreceivable,<sup>8</sup> Berlin would send instructions to Dufour-Feronce; he would then reprimand Azcárate (then Director of the Minorities Section), saying he found it 'absolutely incredible' that such and such a decision was taken. Azcárate's outrage and sense of personal affront that a colleague would use the Secretariat authority structure to discipline him is palpable: '[This reprimanding] was, in the tradition of the Secretariat, absolutely inconceivable. And I had to try to get out of the difficulty without provoking an affair!' (Coddling interview, 25 March 1966)

Signalling an ongoing discussion among the League's international civil servants, Azcárate articulates a conviction that commitment to the 'international spirit' did not involve repudiating national loyalties; rather, it lay in being able to see where the interests of a person's two communities, national and international, coincided:

PA: I myself was always against this tendency, that the international bureaucrat should be 'denationalised'....I find this completely false—people think they must abandon their national sentiment to get a job in the [international] civil service, but [then] it's a thousand times worse because the organisation is filled with hypocritical people placed in a completely false situation. We have to accept that national sentiments are profoundly rooted in each of us, they are absolutely respectable and there is no question of sending them back. But one must reconcile this by saying that it is in the interest of each country to organise humanity in such a way as to avoid war, which assures the possibility of peace and good relations among countries. (Coddling interview, 22 March 1966)



Although condemning the German government's illicit use of its nationals in the Secretariat for narrowly national interests, Azcárate did not agree that the international civil servant should repudiate all contact with his government:

PA: The international civil servant should be independent.... the government must never use their international civil servants as 'agents de liaison' with the Secretary General. Because international civil servants must not take instructions from their government! [Yet] There was always a group of puritans who considered any contact between an international civil servant and his government to be a crime. But this is what is exciting, because you have the feeling of creating something. There are no established rules, no precedents. (Coddling interview, 22 March 1966)

### **Idealism but not Quixotic Humanitarianism**

The ideal that Azcárate was pursuing in the early years as a League civil servant was 'preserving the peace'. Establishing conditions for an enduring peace had been the pre-eminent, though not sole, objective of the Paris Peace Conference.<sup>9</sup> The minorities question was, from very early on, framed by this fundamental goal: minorities became defined as 'objects of international concern' because, being persons 'out of place' in a newly 'national order of things' (Malkki 1992, 25), states were likely to come into conflict over them. However, although no states within Europe were composed of a single nationality, it was only the 'new states' created or

altered by the peace treaties on which minorities treaties were imposed. When, on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1919, state delegates of Romania, Czechoslovakia and the Serbian, Croat and Slovene Kingdom openly rebelled at the inequality of the proposed minorities system being devised by the Great Powers who had 'rejected for themselves the principle of an international obligation of religious toleration' (Macartney 1934, 232), President Wilson replied two days later in a speech the following justification:

'We are trying', he said, 'to make a peaceful settlement, that is to say, to eliminate those elements of disturbance so far as possible, which may interfere with the peace of the world....Take the rights of minorities. Nothing, I venture to say, is more likely to disturb the peace of the world than the treatment which might, in certain cases, be meted out to minorities. And therefore, if the Great Powers are to guarantee the peace of the world in any sense, is it unjust that they should be satisfied that the proper and necessary guarantees have been given?'

Intra-European civilizational hierarchies were thus deeply etched into the minorities regime, complicating its functioning. Minorities Section officials saw on a daily basis how the treaty-bound states—informally known as 'Minority States' (Claude 1956)--experienced these additional treaties as a humiliating 'violation' of their national sovereignty, creating a second-class status that only intensified their preoccupations with 'honour' and prestige (Cowan 2003, 2007b). Knowing that any improvement of conditions for minorities depended on the cooperation of the government in whose territory they resided, the Minorities Section Director, the Norwegian Erik Colban, feared 'zealous humanitarians' and their confrontational tactics (Fink 2004, 277). Responding to criticisms that the League had failed in its minority protection worked

because it had been too conciliatory toward governments, Azcárate—a Spaniard-- spells out the implications of such Quixotic humanitarianism through a literary example from Miguel de Cervantes' novel:

Readers of the story of Don Quixote will remember that as soon as the latter had been dubbed a knight by the innkeeper, he set off for his native village for a supply of money, clean shirts and a squire to attend him. Passing by a thicket, he heard the sound of doleful cries and hastened forward to 'redress the wrong', in accordance with the laws of the order of knighthood which he had just entered. The cries proceeded from a young boy of fifteen named Andrew, who John Haldudo, his master, tied to an oak tree and was beating mercilessly because the lad had claimed certain wages which were owing to him. Don Quixote, as a champion of justice, forced Haldudo at the point of the lance to untie the boy and to promise him his just dues. But no sooner had Don Quixote left them than Haldudo, far from fulfilling his promise, tied the boy up to the oak tree again, and gave him twice as many lashes as he had originally intended. This was recounted to Don Quixote by Andrew himself when the two met again later. 'And now I may thank you for this, for had you rid on your journey, and neither meddled nor made, seeing nobody sent for you, and it was none of your business, my master, perhaps, had been satisfied with giving me ten or twenty lashes, and after that would have paid me what he

owed me, but you was so huffy, and called him so many names, that it made him mad, and so he vented all his spite against you upon my poor back, as soon as yours was turned, insomuch that I fear I shall never be my own man again (Azcárate 1945: 134-135).

As suggested by a moment in one of the interviews with Jean Siotis (JS), Azcárate's experience with certain League personalities may lie behind this cautionary tale. He describes how the proposal for creating a Permanent Minorities Commission, as a sub-commission of the League of Nations Council, was raised in the Assembly. This idea enjoyed support among a number of civic, humanitarian and internationalist organisations concerned with the problems of minorities, but international civil servants in the Minorities Section, like others in the Secretariat, found it completely unrealistic, knowing that it would be resisted not only by treaty-bound states, but also by the League's most powerful states, including Britain, France and Italy. Azcárate speaks with exasperation at the stupidity of placing the issue on the agenda at all.

PA. What is the point of provoking such an explosion that would only destroy everything? On the one hand, the interested states would be really intractable in relation to this initiative, and on the other, the Secretariat would have completely ruined the trust that they had laboriously succeeded in winning from one side or the other.

JS: Even so, when one sees the origin of these propositions, one asks oneself if it was pure demagoguery, or if it was simply naiveté on the part of those who put it forward? Why would the Canadians engage in demagoguery?

PA: Dandurand<sup>10</sup> was....absolutely caught up in this kind of populism. He wanted to become the great champion of all the world's humanitarian causes, it was his...

JS: You mean, a knight on a white horse...

PA: Yes, yes, he played the role of defending the oppressed, the unfortunate, all of this coming out of a completely confused head. We're talking about someone who lived in a fantasy world; it was total confusion.

In his monograph, Azcárate acknowledged that minorities, treaty-bound states and, most important for him, 'public opinion' were disappointed by the League minorities regime (1945:130): 'The method of compromises and adjustments, of friendly pressure and persuasion, could hardly satisfy those (and they were in the majority) who had hoped to find in the League protection of minorities the spirit and method of the judge rather than the diplomat' (1945: 131). But he believed that world public opinion, especially, was asking the League system to provide justice when its remit was, in fact, to prevent inter-state conflict. Moreover, such expectations were all the

more unrealistic given that the League had no sanctions, and in his observation, powerful states (especially Britain and France) seemed disinclined to use what pressure they could have wielded. In his book, Azcárate expresses indignation at the unfairness of the judgments of self-righteous critics; moreover, he hints at the emotional costs that this constant, and uncomprehending, criticism created for him and his colleagues. At the same time, this criticism may have vindicated and reinforced his (and others') 'international spirit', as he expressed with rueful stoicism:

Sufficient justice has not been done to the wide though hidden service which the League of Nations has afforded the cause of peace by diverting to itself the many currents of irritation, ill-will and disappointment which would otherwise have done increasing harm to interstate relations, or would have been the cause of grave disturbances in the future. I must confess that during the years which I spent in the Minorities Section of the League of Nations, the one thing that did most to sustain my morale in the face of the continual criticism and blame which were directed against us, was the fact that, whether such censure was justified or not, this diversion to itself on the part of the League, of the bitterness and hostility existing between the states, represented an appreciable service in the cause of international collaboration in the first difficult period after the last war. (Azcárate 1945: 67-68)

## **Justice and bureaucratic practice**

Placing the minorities treaties under the League of Nations' 'international guarantee' constituted a profound shift in the responsibility of care for those classified as minorities. Whereas historically up to this point, a so-called 'kin state' or imperial state typically intervened as 'protector' when a specific religious or ethnic/linguistic community faced threats or danger, an intervention that often provoked a hostile response from another state, the international guarantee was intended precisely to avoid such conflicts between states. The 'guarantee clause' written into nearly all the minorities treaties gave the right to 'any Council member' to alert the Council of a possible infraction, and entrusted the League Council to take any action it saw as appropriate (Azcárate 1945, 94–101). But beyond these basic methods, neither the treaties nor the League of Nations Covenant spelled out how the League should ensure that the treaties were being observed. League civil servants consequently had unusual latitude to develop their own approaches and over time, minorities treaty supervision came to entail a polymorphous and dispersed set of practices (Cowan 2003, 2007a, 2013; Cussó 2013; Fink 2004).

Broadly speaking, there were three areas of activity. The first concerned activities triggered by the arrival of a petition (treated as 'information'): examining it for receivability, (if receivable) liaising with the accused government for its comments, drafting analytical summaries, collating documents and providing information and advice to the Committees of Three (states) which considered any receivable petition.

Secondly, Section officials were charged collectively with developing expertise on minority situations, with each Member of Section assigned two to three countries

for which he was to develop a deep knowledge. The files reveal wide-ranging information gathering and include reports (commissioned as well as unsolicited), pamphlets, school materials and newspaper cuttings on sundry issues: assassinations, arrests, land reforms, refugee camps and border skirmishes.

Thirdly, the Section was engaged in the work of building and maintaining human relationships, and the flows of information that good relations enabled, between themselves and a wide range of people. The files reveal frequent meetings and extensive written correspondence between Section officials and diplomats, minorities (including elected or self-appointed community leaders, and minority intelligentsia such as professionals, intellectuals or politicians) and numerous 'concerned world citizens', some of whom acted as advocates of minorities.

In these various activities, a distinctive bureaucratic performance could be observed: a punctilious following of procedure and proper etiquette. Nevertheless, when reading the files relating to the so-called Bulgarian Minorities, I also discerned much principled improvisation. For petitions which failed to meet one or even several criteria of receivability, yet which one or more Section members thought deserved a wider scrutiny, a Section member might suggest, in a frequently detailed memorandum in the circulating file, ideas for an alternative approach, then await colleagues' responses, as well as those of Colban and Drummond. A long and complex dialogue would then ensue.

As a result of one of these, provoked when a Persian colleague in the Minorities Section, Mr Hekime, became exasperated, in spring 1927, at the number of petitions concerning Macedonia being ruled 'irreceivable' on the grounds of 'a slight excess of



language”, Section officials became (for a time) a little less stringent in their interpretations of what counted as ‘violent language’ (Cowan 2003: 284-285). At another moment, several colleagues explored, along with the Secretary General, whether *portions* of a petition might be judged ‘receivable’ and transmitted—in respect of a petition that they had judged ‘irreceivable’ yet which described a situation that they believed the accused government should see and address (Cowan 2007: 37-38). Frequently, they passed along sideways, often under ‘private’ cover (for instance, to the Greco-Bulgarian Mixed Commission) communications that they felt did not qualify as petitions, in order that these might, nonetheless, receive some follow up (Cowan 2008). Having followed such debates and negotiations in the files, and having argued that ‘in an important sense, the Minorities Section itself *constructed* petitions’ (Cowan 2003: 280) I was intrigued to find in the interviews Azcárate’s recollection of the decision by Director of the Minorities Section Erik Colban and the League Secretary General Sir Eric Drummond *not* to define the term, ‘minority petition’:

PA: I remember, there is a dossier that records a discussion of the question: ‘What is a minority petition, apart from the question of receivability? That is, we must define the minority petition, we must know what it consists of, to know whether there is a question to examine.’ And...when we discussed this question, I remember that somebody said: ‘Yes, but if we present a position concerning a minority or its situation, and if that minority doesn’t exist, it’s not a minority petition.’

JS: Had this view had been expressed internally within the Secretariat?

PA: Yes, we talked about it, but [after a discussion] the question was resolved without becoming the object of a definition—it was probably Colban or Drummond who said, ‘but in the end, why, after that whole question...it’s not worth it, let’s move forward, we shall see in each particular case, we go forward, in the end that’s how it is’ (Siotis interview, 9 March 1965).

This approach of working intuitively, arriving at a decision as they went along, rather than fixing a definition and determining whether or not a particular case corresponded to it, also underpinned the wariness of Azcárate and his colleagues toward the Legal Section:

PA: I myself, and I think Colban, too, were a little afraid to leave too much room for jurists to intervene in minorities questions because the intervention of jurists constituted a danger of rendering the question too rigid rather than keeping it, as we tended to do, as fluid and malleable as possible, in order to be able to push the maximum and arrive at something which didn’t create conflict yet which, at the same time, was satisfactory. The intervention of a jurist constituted a danger of making the question rigid and of closing us into a framework that would limit very much our liberty of action, of movement, of negotiation, essentially to arrive at a

compromise. One has to take into account that all the minorities questions had to be resolved by compromise....' [Azcárate then expounded on the fact that it was always the Minorities Section who decided whether or not to take a petition to Legal Section]: 'this collaboration was very useful—not only did we use their legal advice very often in our negotiations, which was very useful, but we did not feel always obliged to put the said question into a strictly and specially juridical channel'. (Siotis interview, 9 March 1965)

Finally, informality and discretion were central to the Minorities Section's ways of working. In a context in which state members of Council were extremely reluctant to bring any but the most serious allegations of treaty violation to the Council's attention, Minorities Section Director Erik Colban dealt with lower intensity, ongoing minority issues by developing an approach based on face-to-face relationships with government officials and leaders in minority communities and the cultivation of personal authority. Colban believed that 'the most efficient way to prevent possible oppression [of a minority] by a government' was through acts of 'personal persuasion, on the basis of having acquired personal and moral authority in the eyes of the government and state authorities, rather than through the functioning of a formal and public system' (Coddling interview, 22 March 1966). Moreover, the League's official commitment to open (rather than covert) diplomacy notwithstanding (Clavin 2013, 15), Erik Colban and his staff robustly defended the 'behind closed doors' approach. They knew that given treaty-bound states'

sensitivity to humiliation, exposing and embarrassing them publicly could lead to backlash against minorities. They needed the cooperation of state officials; this was more easily elicited away from the light of publicity, though the Secretariat sometimes responded to a non-cooperative state by threatening publicity.<sup>11</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The League of Nations 'experiment' should not be romanticised. Although in its early days the institution was the object of many divergent visions of internationalism (from imperialist to socialist), imperial (especially British) conceptions of world government held by its primary architects—that the experienced and enlightened should lead and tutor the less civilised—emerged as dominant and determined its form (Mazower 2009, 194–95). Its civil service—primarily British and French but with significant representation from the smaller countries of Europe, Latin America and the Far East—was overwhelmingly white and Eurocentric, even when not European, and most embraced the institution's sense of civilising mission and the racial hierarchies that underpinned it, with respect not only to non-white colonial subjects but also to 'less civilised' communities within Europe.

Yet it is important to grasp the idealism that the League idea elicited. In the immediate post-war period of the 1920s, the prospect of working together toward a public good that reached beyond, while also including, fellow citizens of one's own country, captured the imagination of individuals from a wide range of nationalities who, like Cohen and McGeachy, yearned to participate. Rather than a 'social production of indifference' (Herzfeld 1992), Azcárate's accounts of his own and his

colleagues' bureaucratic practice in the new international civil service testify to a passionate commitment to building 'the international spirit' and a peaceful, prosperous world: a commitment that launched them on a 'uniquely adventurous journey into unexplored territory...with no familiar landmarks, mapped charts or itineraries' (Ranshofen-Wertheimer 1945, 81).

'Pursuing an ideal' (explicitly of peace, but implicitly of international cooperation) required a pragmatic approach: recognising that the 'strict interpretation of the treaties' that treaty-bound states insisted upon constrained the space for manoeuvre, Azcárate took pride in negotiating compromises that, 'if not very brilliant from a layman's point of view, were perhaps in the circumstances more useful to the minorities and to the cause of peace' (Azcárate 1945, 101) His idealism was not starry-eyed, however. Although generally upbeat, he acknowledged that pursuing this ideal also entailed disappointment (when colleagues betrayed the institution's values and the trust that guarantees its esprit de corps), frustration (when public opinion 'misunderstood' the nature of their task and what could be achieved) and hurt, followed by bemused stoicism (when angry criticism was directed against the Secretariat, though in his estimation, the fault lay with the states involved).

Against stereotypes of bureaucratic rigidity, my work on Minorities Section supervision reveals a bureaucracy in formation, in which procedures were devised as they went along in response to the tasks they faced. Indeed, their bureaucratic practices reflected the tensions between two divergent visions of the League project: one which aimed to situate interstate relations in an increasingly elaborate

and consistent edifice of international law (Koskenniemi 2001) and the other which, in Jean Monnet's (1978, 82) phrase, saw the League as a context for states 'to establish the habit of teamwork'. Consequently, officials like Azcárate saw themselves as navigating constantly between 'The Treaties' (or in his terms, 'The Law') and the specific, changing political conditions pertaining between each minority situation (or 'Politics') through an oscillation between what I have called 'punctilious proceduralism' and 'principled improvisation'. While Azcárate and his colleagues worked within a system whose aim 'was not humanitarian, but purely political' (Azcárate 1945, 14), their development of a practice of minorities treaties supervision that relied on powers of persuasion and that acknowledged the need for the state's cooperation clearly formed the basis for contemporary compliance-based approaches to international law, including human rights. Azcárate's account gives us a glimpse into the idealism, passion and ethical commitment that motivated international civil servants' cautious creativity.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Slavic speaking' is commonly used as an adjective in academic discourse in Greece to acknowledge the Slavic character of the language, with its numerous local variations, spoken by many in northern Greece, but simultaneously, to avoid, refuse or side-step the controversial question of its national character. Moreover, this tends to be described as a dialect, rather than a language. It is important to note that 'Slavic' is not accepted as a neutral term by those who believe the language is more accurately named as 'Macedonian' or 'Bulgarian'(Kostopoulos 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The treaties signed by Greece and the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes gave full civil and political rights to all inhabitants, irrespective of national origin and some special rights pertaining to language, education and civic associations. The Neuilly Protocol (1917) marked an agreement between Greece and Bulgaria to carry out a voluntary and reciprocal emigration, that is, of Greeks living in Bulgaria to 'return' to Greece, and Bulgarians living in Greece to 'return' to Bulgaria (see Cowan 2008; Kontogiorgi 2006). For comprehensive descriptions of the League of Nations minorities regime, see Mair 1928; Bagley 1950; Fink 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Typed and bound transcripts of these interviews are in the LON Private Papers collection, Box 273.

<sup>4</sup> All translations from French to English are mine.

<sup>5</sup> See also the biography of Rajchman (Balinska 1998).

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<sup>6</sup> A widely held view among both scholars and contemporary analysts is that the replacement of the British Secretary General Sir Eric Drummond in 1933 by the French Joseph Avenol marked a decisive change, and decline, in the Secretariat's functioning; indeed, Avenol's tenure has been described in a major biography as 'betrayal from within', see Barros 1969; Kennedy 1987; Ranshofen-Wertheimer 1945; Rupp 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Germany joined the League of Nations in 1926 and German nationals entered as staff to the Secretariat soon after.

<sup>8</sup> To be receivable, petitions had to fulfill five conditions (for a detailed discussion of the implications, see (Cowan 2003).

#### Petitions

1. must have in view the protection of minorities in accordance with the treaties;
2. in particular, they must not be submitted in the form of a request for a severance of political relations between the minority in question and the State of which it forms a part;
3. must not emanate from an anonymous or unauthenticated source;
4. must abstain from violent language;
5. must contain information or refer to facts which have not recently been the subject of a petition submitted to the ordinary procedure.

<sup>9</sup> This is acknowledged in the title of Margaret Macmillan's classic text: *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and its attempt to end war* (2001).

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<sup>10</sup> Raoul Dandurand was a Canadian delegate during the period when Canada had a seat on the League Council (1927-1930). In 1929, he had lobbied for significant changes in the League's approach to minorities.

<sup>11</sup> See Cowan 2013 for further discussion on secrecy versus transparency as strategies for international organisations; see also Marilyn Strathern's influential article on the tyranny of transparency (Strathern 2000).