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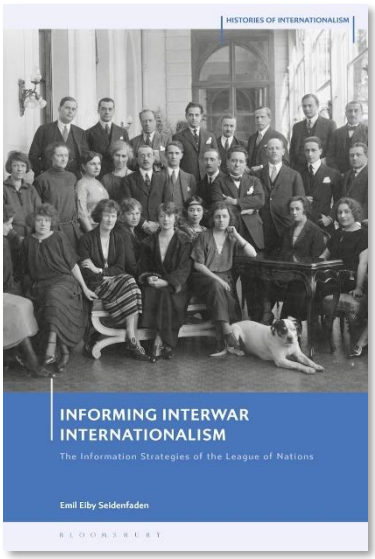

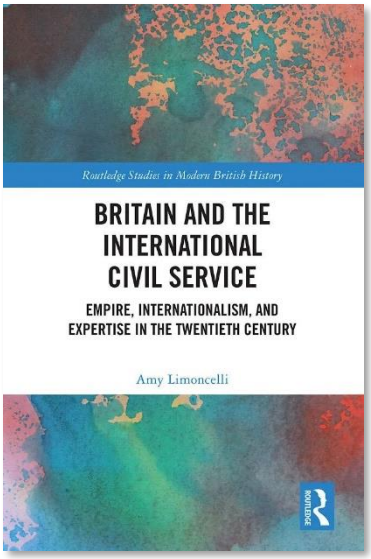

Emil Eiby Seidenfaden

Informing Interwar Internationalism.
The Information Strategies of the League of Nations
(Histories of Internationalism)

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Amy Limoncelli

Britain and the International Civil Service.
Empire, Internationalism and Expertise in the Twentieth Century
(Routledge Studies in Modern British History)

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reviewed by

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The still-burgeoning research field of international relations and new internationalism has produced an extensive body of literature over the past two decades. Competing and cooperating variants of internationalism, such as liberal internationalism, are among the most critical topics, which have recently been discussed less in terms of international versus national

tensions, but rather in the context of inter-imperial and inter-colonial relations.[1] Recent scholarship has identified a highly heterogeneous group of actors promoting various forms of internationalism, including pacifists, anti-colonial nationalists, or experts from a wide range of disciplines, whose networks have become increasingly concentrated in international organizations. As the successor to the League of Nations, the United Nations (UN) is regarded as a tangible forum and platform for competing models of world order, as well as a lens through which to view new forms, practices, and instruments of (often asymmetric) inter- and trans-national cooperation and governance.[2] The two books discussed here can also be placed within this complex field.

Emil Eiby Seidenfaden's book, based on his PhD thesis at Aarhus University in 2019, deals with the information strategies of the League of Nations' Information Section between 1919 and 1946. It shows that the »public legitimation strategies« (p. 154) of the League of Nations's Information Section incrementally resulted in »internationalism in practice« (p. 1), but were embedded into a »triangle of tensions« (p. 154). The three factors that had to be balanced differently, depending on the specific circumstances, were: firstly, competing conceptualizations of the »public« that had to be addressed and mobilized; secondly, the unclear degree of the League's agency within the international system; and thirdly, questions regarding legitimate methods of promoting the League without resorting to the ambiguous, dazzling concept of »propaganda«.

The book's first part covers the »golden age« (p. 24) of the Information Section, which Seidenfaden dates from 1919 to 1933. Solid financial resources and a multinational staff led by the first director, Pierre Comert, and his second-in-command, Arthur Sweester – who strove to secure open diplomacy and keep internationalism alive – contributed to the Information Section's »key position in the [League's] Secretariat« (p. 153) during this phase. In addition, the actors in the Information Section shared a dual understanding of »public« that guided their actions from the outset: one layer of meaning referred to the general public and ›the man on the street‹, while the other, more dominant layer was aimed at the political, cultural, and educational elites. In order to reach the »public«, the Information Section relied on the concept of »cooperative publicity« (p. 51), which was never explicitly formulated. In addition to liaising with intellectuals, activists, and public figures, collaboration with the Geneva press corps and the general press was crucial for disseminating the League's changing messages. The Information Section provided these intermediaries with information that emphasized »neutrality« and facts, with the intention of preventing any appearance of »propaganda« at all costs.

The intertwining of the global economic crisis, growing tensions in international relations, and the associated loss of legitimacy of the League of Nations, as well as the breakthrough of new communication technologies in the form of broadcasting and film, provided the impetus for a restructuring of the Information Section in 1933–34, which is dealt with in the second part of the book. Overall, this not only resulted in a reduction in the scope and size of the Information Section but also in »a whole new climate of centralisation and surveillance« (p. 104). The modes of communication and the thematic and rhetorical design of information materials were also subject to change in the early and mid-1930s. What was new was not only a »partial retreat to aesthetics« and a »systematically constructed league symbolism« (p. 131), but also a shift in focus to technical issues and a laboured crisis rhetoric that permeated the publications and portrayed the League as a preventative force against a possible new world conflict. In a sense, this restructuring was quite sustainable, as Seidenfaden convincingly argues in a final analysis of the League's and its Information Section's legacy. Despite their designs for a new

[1] Cf. *Tokomo Akami*, Liberal Internationalism Reconsidered: Inter-Imperialism, Liberalism, and the League of Nations in Asia and the Pacific, in: *Christopher R. Hughes/ Hatsue Shinohara* (eds.), East Asians in the League of Nations. Actors, Empires and Regions in Early Global Politics, Singapore 2023, pp. 11–36.
[2] Cf. *Thomas Bottelier/Jan Stöckmann* (eds.), Instruments of International Order. Internationalism and Diplomacy, 1900–50, Manchester 2024.

international organization differing in several respects, former leading officials of the Information Section were able to exert a formative influence on the committees responsible for establishing the UN Department of Public Information between 1942 and 1946, due to their experience in the League, as well as a specific, more diverse conception of »public opinion« and media infrastructure.

The central added value of Seidenfaden's work lies above all in the careful compilation and evaluation of source material, which allows the author to gain differentiated insights into the modes and techniques of communication as well as legitimation strategies in the midst of the tensions between »propaganda«, »public opinion«, and internationalism – for example, the examination of the subtle shifts in the League's approach to »public opinion« in the 1920s is particularly convincing. By highlighting the numerous areas of tension in which the Information Section had to operate, Seidenfaden succeeds in adding complexity to the picture of the League of Nations and largely dispels the assumption that it was a unified actor.

In some instances, however, the author's strong focus on internal developments is problematic, for example, when he identifies the League's »administrative and political infrastructure« (p. 6) as decisive in conceptualizing the role of the Information Section vis-à-vis public opinion. Here, as elsewhere, one could have wished for a broader historicization of the key terms »public opinion« and »propaganda«. For example, it would be worth asking whether and to what extent the strategies he identified in the Information Section reflected, followed, or deviated from transnational debates and uses of the these terms, particularly in Great Britain and France, given the overrepresentation of British and French civil servants in the Information Section.[3] Although Seidenfaden's analytical focus is legitimately placed on the halls of Geneva, it would have been beneficial to occasionally seek information on the feedback and learning effects that arose among the actors in the Information Section in response to the impact, or lack thereof, of the »message from Geneva« on specific target groups. But despite these criticisms, the book represents an essential contribution to research. Seidenfaden expands our understanding of liberal internationalism by revealing further facets of this »open-ended set of ideas« (p. 158) and the associated practices. At the same time, the book serves as an essential reference work for further studies that explore the intersection of journalism, public communication, and diplomacy, thereby challenging the assumption of a monolithic interwar period.

Amy Limoncelli's monograph, which also takes an actor-oriented approach, examines the legacies of British internationalism as it was carried on by British government officials in the League of Nations' and the UN's International Civil Service between the 1920s and the 1970s. As the decisive lines of continuity between the League and the UN she identifies the linkage between »the idea of the ›truly international‹ secretariat [...,] its basis in the British civil service« (p. 148), and the »core ideas of expertise and neutrality« (p. 3), which served as a leitmotif to cloak the expansive orientation of British foreign policy on the international stage.

Entirely consistent with previous research, Limoncelli argues, that these core ideas were able to influence the technical fields of action that the League of Nations opened up. By building on the path dependencies of the British Empire since the 19th century, this intellectual influence was intertwined with a high quota of British servants in the international staff of the League Secretariat, notably with the British Secretary-General Eric Drummond as a key figure in this phase. As the author points out, in both the inter-Allied wartime planning and the planning of the UN Preparatory Commission in 1945, the British representatives were able to draw on the wealth of experience of the British international civil servants in the League of Nations, accumulated up to 1939, as well as on the League's administrative and technical infrastructure. For the second time after 1918/19, and despite changed conditions brought about by decolonization, the British were able after 1945, to exert a significant influence on

[3] Cf. for transnational contexts *Daniel Hucker*, Public Opinion and Twentieth-Century Diplomacy. A Global Perspective, London 2022; cf. esp. for the British case *Scott Anthony*, Public Relations and the Making of Modern Britain. Stephen Tallents and the Birth of a Progressive Media, Manchester 2012.

the shaping of the post-war order with their specific version of internationalism and by filling essential posts in the administration of international organizations. With Gladwyn Jebb, a Briton became the first acting secretary-general of the UN. In contrast, the UN's move from London to New York in 1946 marked a significant decline in the British Foreign Office's influence. Here, as elsewhere, the asymmetrical comparisons Limoncelli draws to advance her argument would have been even more astute if they had been explained in more detail rather than merely hinted at.

The author also explores how and to what extent the »drastic« (p. 16) loss of British influence between 1947 and 1960 came about as a result of the Cold War, the predominance of the United States, and the growing strength of anti-colonial advocacy in the UN. This, as Limoncelli points out, was accompanied by a change in perception within the Foreign Office and among British officials, such as those in the influential Chatham House think tank, who no longer viewed the UN only as an opportunity to preserve imperial legacies but also »as both an important priority and a potential opponent« (p. 91). However, even in the 1960s, termed by the author as the »Development Decade«, the »public relations« plan with which the British government responded, hoping to present itself as »a benevolent expert rather than an empire« (p. 98), had little effect, according to Limoncelli, as competition for positions in the international civil service had reached a significantly higher level by then. Subsequently, Limoncelli turns her attention to the 1970s and asks to what extent these years represented a »radical shift« (p. 127) in the British approach to the international civil service. As she describes, the expansion of the UN to include members from the Global South led to further shifts in the balance of power in decision-making processes and the composition of committees and commissions. This resulted in a threefold loss of influence for the United Kingdom within the international civil service: a loss of significance of the idea of British liberal internationalism, a quantitative loss of the overrepresentation of British civil servants in the administration of the UN, and a qualitative loss in terms of experience, which was mainly a consequence of the retirement of the first generations of international civil servants.

Limoncelli's work is especially convincing in its detailed biographical case studies of British civil servants both in the League, respectively the UN, and in the British Foreign Ministry, which highlight the perceptions, motives, and expectations that influenced the designing and staffing of the international services. But, although the study is based on solid archival evidence, its findings are occasionally descriptive and in part come as little surprise when contrasted with the panorama of other recent research. Limoncelli's key finding that the League of Nations and the UN served »as vehicles to support global political stability, communication, and economic links, goals shared by the British Empire« (p. 4) is not as »forgotten« (p. 47) as she claims, but has already been established to a certain extent by previous studies on the various constellations and stages in which decolonization and the British withdrawal from its empire took place.[4] Furthermore, little attention is paid by the author to the extent to which British actors in the international civil service exploited the new fields of action that emerged from overarching processes, such as the Cold War and Decolonisation, to further British interests. Recent research, not yet covered in Limoncelli's book, has identified topics such as the environment and gentrification as worthwhile areas of investigation.[5]

[4] Cf. *Mark M. Mazower*, No Enchanted Palace. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations, Princeton 2009; *Susan Pedersen*, The Guardians. The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire, Oxford 2015; *Jamie Martin*, The Meddlers. Sovereignty, Empire, and the Birth of Global Economic Governance, Cambridge 2022.

[5] Cf. recently *Giusi Russo*, The UN and the Colonial World: New Questions and New Directions, in: Journal of Contemporary History 57, 2022, pp. 212–217.

Zitierempfehlung

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