

THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS AND THE MASS MEDIA: The Rediscovery of a Forgotten Story

by

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Introduction

One may wonder what has the pre-World War II League of Nations to do with the contemporary world – a world faced with Star Wars and other issues of "post-modern" nature. In these times we are accustomed to celebrate the 40th anniversary of various post-World War II events such as the founding of the United Nations and UNESCO, but hardly anyone has been interested in getting beyond that time. War has become a kind of point zero for our conception of modern history.

Especially odd might appear at first sight the topic of the mass media in the context of the League. At most one might recall that at the dawn of the League, in the early 1920s, a convention was adopted in Geneva on the prevention of the dissemination of and commerce in pornographic publications – something that in most countries today is considered as anachronism. Perhaps one might even know about another convention, on the use of broadcasting in the cause of peace, adopted at the League in the late 1930s – as a last-minute act of peaceful diplomacy before the fascists' weapons started to speak. But more than that is hardly known.

Yet there is a lot to be found from the yellowish pages of pre-war history – not only details of academic interest but also fundamental matters with high intellectual and political relevance to the contemporary world. Naturally the structure of the world was quite different before the war, not least with regard to what is known today as the Third World. But a closer look at the historical development shows that the most crucial issues have their origin in the pre-war period and that even the roots of the New International Order can be traced back to that stage.

Therefore, it is not without reason that we take up this topic in 1986 – in the International Year of Peace and at a time when the Non-Aligned Movement is gathering to its summit in Harare.

The story of the League of Nations and the mass media provided us with topical material under at least three different chapters:

1. “Collaboration of the Press in the Organisation of Peace” – activities related to the general operative conditions of the press, with landmarks such as international expert conferences in Geneva (1927), Copenhagen (1932) and Madrid (1933).
2. “Moral Disarmament” – activities related to the first Disarmament Conference in Geneva (1932-33).
3. “Modern Means of Spreading Information Utilised in the Cause of Peace” – activities related to cinema and broadcasting, including the 1936 landmark Convention on the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace.

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The Idea and the Birth of the Organization

After World War I it was believed that a new era was to begin in international relations. The horrors of war were fresh in people's minds; there was a need to prevent future wars and to establish conditions for lasting peace. Power politics and secret diplomacy were regarded as major reasons for the outbreak of war. Now the time had come to replace them by *international cooperation, collective security* and *open diplomacy*. The League of Nations was established in 1920 to channel these aspirations; it was the first great exercise of the world in organizing itself for peace.

The Council of the League met for the first time on 16 January 1920, six days after the Treaty of Versailles came into force. The Covenant of the League was part of the Treaty; the formulation of the Covenant was made by a special Committee established by the Paris Peace Conference. The Committee was chaired by the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson. Wilson wanted the drafting of the Covenant and the setting up of the League of Nations to be an integral part of the whole Peace Conference and that it be given priority over other difficult problems¹. Peace was to be the highest value.

Woodrow Wilson's person became to symbolize the whole idea of the League. However, despite his great personal efforts, he was unable to get the US Senate to ratify the Covenant. The Covenant has been described as "a testament to the aspiration of man to govern his affairs by reason, to assert the concept of justice into the settlement of international disputes and to enshrine the collective interest of all nations a supreme above the interests of any group of nations or of any individual nations".²

The preamble of the Covenant reads as follows:

The High Contracting Parties,
 In order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security,
 by the acceptance of obligations not to resort to war, by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations,
 by the firm establishment of the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments, and
 by the maintenance of justice and scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations in the dealings of organized peoples with one another,
 Agree to this Covenant of the League of Nations.

¹ Claude, Inis L. Jr., *Swords into Plowshares*. New York. 1971, pp. 42-43; Scott, George, *The Rise and Fall of the League of Nations*. New York 1973, pp. 14-15.

² Scott, op.cit., p. 15.

One of the leading ideas that the League had was to work in public and to give wide publicity to its activities, marking the dawn of open diplomacy. This can be read from the preamble: “(...) international peace and security (...) could be achieved (...) by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations (...)”. The League also relied upon the influence and impact of public opinion in international relations. Woodrow Wilson called the League “the court of public opinion”.³

It was natural, then, that the League gave quite a new role to the mass media – it was indeed possible to speak about “close and almost constitutional link between the League, the Press and general publicity”, as put in 1928 by a booklet “The League of Nations and the press”.⁴ This publication begins with the following characteristic statement:

It was the clear intention of the founders of the League of Nations that it should mark the beginning of a new era in international relations; and it was equally clear that in their minds one of the essential conditions was a complete departure from the old methods of secret diplomacy. From the beginning, the guiding principle of the new organisation has been to give the widest publicity to its activities, and nowadays publicity as a rule means the Press. The League works in public - that is to say, in the presence of and with the Press. The Press and publicity are part and parcel of the general conception of the League of Nations, and this has involved the establishment of relations which are entirely novel as between an official organisation and the independent newspaper world.

The role of the press was stressed already at the Paris Peace Conference, but no action was taken at that time.⁵ It was through the League that the press achieved a new and institutionalized role in international relations, reflected in such developments as the gathering of foreign correspondents at the League.⁶ The press was indeed incorporated into the system of international relations in an unprecedented manner – comparable only to the step taken much earlier when the press assumed its central role in bourgeois democracy by operating as an extension of Parliament.

Collaboration of the Press in the Organisation of Peace

On 16 September 1925 the delegate for Chile, M. Yanez said at the 12th plenary session of the League Assembly:

³ Claude, *op.cit.*, p. 52; see also Walters, E.P., *The League of Nations*, pp. 38-39 in Luard, Evan (ed.), *The Evolution of International Organization*. 2nd ed. New York 1967.

⁴ *The League of Nations and the Press*. International Press Exhibition. Cologne, May to October 1928. Information Section. League of Nations. Geneva 1928, p. 7.

⁵ United Nations Conference on Freedom of Information. *The Freedom of the Press*. Some historical notes. E/CONF.6/4, (11 February 1948). The proposals in 1918-19 originated from President Wilson's chief communication advisor, Mr. Walter S. Rogers, whose papers were published 1944 in Report of the Team of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University in New York.

⁶ Douglas, Paul F. & Bömer, Karl, *The Press as a Factor in International Relations*, in *National and World Planning*. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 162, July 1932, pp. 241-272.

We must stimulate among the people that new spirit which the war produced and which the League of Nations is trying to spread throughout the world. (...)

I can conceive no more effective method of forming this new spirit than by influencing the minds of peoples through the Press and moulding the future generations in the schools.

With regard to the Press, I suggest for your consideration the idea of unifying its directive action on public opinion and its moral influence over Governments.

Journalism has in every country but one meaning in its spirit and in its essence, because it is and should be the reflection of the ideas of liberty, progress and morality.

A universal bond of feeling unites all men and all peoples on the question of peace and the welfare of the working classes. The Press is the vanguard of these ideas, and that is why I submit the following draft resolution to the Assembly. (...)

I wonder if this idea can be considered as coming within the scope of the action and mission of the League? Can the League call upon the Press of the entire world to collaboration in the work of world fraternity, in that powerful intellectual movement which will be the best guarantee of security, disarmament and arbitration? I believe it can.

If the League of Nations is not legally entitled to do so, it at least possesses the moral authority to take this step, and I think it should do so.⁷

The initiative was welcomed by a number of delegations - Spain, Uruguay, the British Empire, France, China... Among the interesting details to be found in the debate on the Chilean proposal (in the sixth Committee of the Assembly dealing with political questions) is the intervention of the Hungarian delegate Apponyi. According to the proceedings he

recalled that at the meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Conference which took place in Paris in 1900, he had sponsored a similar proposal which had been submitted to that meeting. That attempt had entirely failed, because it had been too ambitious. It had aimed at imposing a certain guidance on all organs of the Press; this was contradictory to the very nature of the Press, the organs of which were jealous of their freedom.

In appealing to the Press to collaborate in the work of universal conciliation, care must be taken not to repeat this mistake; no attempt should be made to dominate the Press or to make it dependent on any organ of the League of Nations, but it should have access to the sources of information at the disposal of the League. If the Chilean proposal were applied in this sense, it might bear fruit.

The delegate of Belgium, M. Hymans, was entrusted to summarize the results of this debate to the full Assembly on 25 September 1925. He wrote in his report:

I need not emphasise here the part played by the Press in international life. The newspapers are fundamental to all the judgements which public opinion in each country passes on the other nations of the world. It is for this reason that the Press can exercise a considerable influence in favour of the establishment of better international relations and can contribute more effectively perhaps than any other

⁷ League of Nations document C.611.M.196 (1925). All the following quotations are from original League documents (without however indicating references in each case).

institution to that moral disarmament which is the concomitant condition of material disarmament.

The Chilean proposal is undoubtedly a bold one. The Press, like all great Powers, is rightly jealous of its independence. We must therefore approach the vast and delicate problem raised by this resolution with great circumspection. I wish to make it clear at the outset that the League of Nations does not wish to interfere in the affairs of the Press, and will only interest itself in them if the journalists themselves consider that its assistance would be valuable. (...)

The following is the text of the resolution which I ask you to adopt:

"The Assembly,

"Considering that the Press constitutes the most effective means of guiding public opinion towards that moral disarmament which is a concomitant condition of material disarmament:

"Invites the Council to consider the desirability of conceiving a committee of experts representing the Press of the different continents with a view to determining methods of contributing towards the organisation of peace, especially:

"(a) By ensuring the more rapid and less costly transmission of Press news with a view to reducing risks of international misunderstanding;

"(b) And by discussing all technical problems the settlement of which would be conducive to the tranquillisation of public opinion."

This resolution, a slightly modified version of the original Chilean proposal, was adopted unanimously on the same day. As far as we know, it is the first resolution on the fundamental role of the mass media that was adopted by the League Assembly – indeed the first overall position regarding the mass media that has ever been taken by the international community through its multilateral organization.

It is a remarkable resolution not only because of its historical nature but also because of its political and professional substance. It sets the agenda for a deliberation of technical problems, not only in loose relation to a political context (as is the case of e.g. the IPDC of UNESCO), but explicitly subordinated to the overall objective of peace and international understanding. In this respect it can be seen as an early version of the 1978 Mass Media Declaration of UNESCO – a shorter but more outspoken version than was produced by the international community 53 years later. Moreover, the 1925 resolution combines press and disarmament – two topics which today have become to be quite sensitive and even explosive, as shown by the process of the us and UK withdrawal from UNESCO. It would hardly be possible today to get such a resolution adopted by consensus at the UN or UNESCO.

The resolution was followed up by a round of consultations with various countries and international associations (replies from more than 25 countries by March 1926), a meeting of 16 news agencies in August 1926, a meeting of press bureaux of 17 countries in October 1926, as well as an ad hoc committee drawn from the members of the International Association of Journalists accredited to the League of Nations in January 1927.

On the basis of these preparations the League Council decided at its 44th session in March 1927 to convene a Conference of Press Experts in Geneva on 24-29 August 1927.⁸ The Conference, according to its declaration,

⁸ The Final Report of this Conference of Press Experts was published as League of Nations document Conf. E.P.13 (Geneva, 25 October 1927).

brought together sixty-three experts, twenty assessors, and thirty-five technical advisers, from thirty-eight countries, Members or non-Members of the League, representing not only the different continents of the world but also the different categories within the Press itself, of newspaper proprietors, news-agency representatives, journalists, and directors of official Press bureaux.

The declaration went on to express the appreciation of the Conference among other things "of the principle laid down by the Council and Assembly of the League that there should be no interference whatsoever with the independence of the Press". At the end of the declaration the Conference

Adopts the following programme in order that journalists may have every facility in residing, travelling, securing news and improving their professional equipment, and that news itself may be free at the source, expediated in every possible way in its transmission, protected before and after publication against unfair appropriation, and given the widest possible dissemination, to the end that the work of the Press may be made more effective in its responsible mission accurately and conscientiously to inform world public opinion and hence to contribute directly to the preservation of peace and the advancement of civilisation;

And adopts the following special resolutions, based on technical, professional, and international considerations, as the first steps towards carrying this programme into effect:

The resolutions cover, mostly in great detail, such more or less technical questions as press rates, coding of press messages, improvement of communications, transport of newspapers, postal subscriptions to newspapers, protection of news, professional facilities of journalists (with 10 sub-points) and censorship in peace-time. But among "Miscellaneous Resolutions" there are also two which deal directly with the politically sensitive content of the mass media:

Publication or Distribution of Tendentious News

Fully cognisant of the fact that the publication or distribution of obviously inaccurate, highly exaggerated, or deliberately distorted news or articles is calculated to cause undesirable misunderstandings among nations and suspicions detrimental to international peace;

And desiring to promote among people the growth of mutual understanding, necessary to world peace;

This Conference expresses the desire that the newspapers and news agencies of the world should deem it their duty to take stringent measures to avoid the publication or distribution of such news or articles, and should also consider the possibility of active international cooperation for the attainment of this purpose, which is in conformity with the spirit of the League of Nations.

Moral Disarmament

The Conference makes a warm appeal to the Press of the world to contribute by every means at its disposal to the consolidation of peace, to combat hatred between nationalities and between classes which are the greatest dangers to peace, and to prepare the way for moral disarmament.

The latter of these was adopted unanimously (as was the case with most of the resolutions), but the former was adopted by 27 votes to 2. Here is an early indication of the controversy around the role of the media in international relations - in particular with respect to the content of communication. However, the dominant feature of this Conference was harmony in the spirit of the League, as is well indicated by the closing words of the President, Lord Burnham:

Public opinion is, in the long run, the sovereign power in the government of men. As the trustees of public opinion, we Pressmen have a heavy and constant responsibility to our fellows. All I can hope and pray is that this Conference has deepened and enlarged our consciousness – not a class consciousness, but a general consciousness – of what we owe to mankind, still in the making and re-making, in giving such light and leading as we can to concord and collaboration for the common good.

The results of the Conference were welcomed by the League Council at its subsequent 46th session in September 1927. One of the speakers on that occasion was Sir Austen Chamberlain:

It is obvious that the large body of resolutions passed by this important gathering merit, and must receive, the closest attention of the Governments. (...) There is, however, one resolution which has not yet been mentioned, which I read as a promise of cooperation with the Members of this Council and with all men of goodwill in all parts of the world. I refer to the resolution entitled "Moral Disarmament" (...) I am sure that the collaboration of the Press in such a work is of equal consequence, and may be of even greater influence than anything that statesmen can do, and I welcome this assurance and this pledge that the Conference is prepared to devote its energies to this work.

The Council referred the most technical issues to the Organisation for Communications and Transit, while other resolutions including those on protection of news and on professional facilities of journalists were followed up by the Council in consultation with different governments. No spectacular achievements seem to have taken place in this area in the course of the following few years.

The next major step was taken in the early 1930's, in the context of the 1932-33 World Disarmament Conference – and a deteriorating international situation. The Conference of Governmental Press Bureaux and Representatives of the Press was convened in Copenhagen in January 1932. The scope of this Conference was less technical than that of the 1927 Geneva Conference and its main resolutions were concerned with the inaccurate news, the rest covering follow-up of the earlier Geneva Conference and cooperation of official press bureaux.⁹ The resolutions on inaccurate news include among others the following:

The Committee of Heads of Official Press Bureaux believes it its duty to proclaim that the campaign against the dissemination of inaccurate news is one of the necessities of international life, and, as regards the methods of pursuing this campaign, to formulate the following observations:

⁹ The Final Document of this Conference of Governmental Press Bureaux and Representatives of the Press was published as document C.96.1932, see League of Nations Official Journal, Vol. XIII, No.3 (Part II), March 1932, Minutes of the 66th Session of the Council, pp. 502,789-797.

One of the most effective means of combating inaccurate information is the rapid spread of accurate and abundant information through the agency of the Press Bureaux. Should accurate news not be forthcoming, there is the risk that the Press may show a tendency to seek its information at other and less well-informed sources and to accept, without verifying it, information which is often inaccurate and sometimes tendentious (...).

(Committee of Press Representatives),

Solemnly confirming to the Conference that the international Press, while maintaining its integral right to a fully justified liberty, intends to play its part as distributor of information by propagating only news which, in good faith, it regards as accurate and truthful;

Considering that the most effective means of combating the dissemination of false or inaccurate news is for the Official Press Bureaux, as far as their information is concerned, to furnish authentic news as quickly as possible (...).

(Committee of International Organisations of Journalists),

The Committee considers that the measures that may be taken to avoid the dissemination of inaccurate news should never affect the freedom of the Press, but that this freedom involves the responsibility of journalists as its necessary corollary.

In this spirit, the Committee notes that the international federative organisations represented at the Conference guarantee the intention of their national sections to enforce the observance of the code of honour of journalism by their members and, in the event of serious infractions, to exclude the guilty persons from the said associations and to deprive them momentarily of their status as members of these groups.

The Committee notes the existence of an International Court of Honour, founded by the International Federation of Journalists as a result of the joint initiative of that Federation and the International Association of Journalists accredited to the League of Nations (...).

The Copenhagen Conference was followed up by the Second Conference of Governmental Press Bureaux and Representatives of the Press, convened in Madrid on 7-11 November 1933.¹⁰ It was convened on the basis of the hope expressed by the 13th Assembly of the League of Nations that definite proposals might be made with a view to “giving effect to some of the principal suggestions offered by the Press Organizations during the enquiry into the problem of the spread of false information which might threaten to disturb the peace of the world and the good understanding between nations”.

The Madrid Conference reviewed the action taking under the earlier Copenhagen resolutions and considered various related problems such as the right to correct false information in the international field, the intellectual role of the press, broadcasting and international relations, and the status of press correspondents in foreign countries. According to the Conference Report the discussions “showed that all those who participated remained faithful to the spirit of the resolutions adopted by the Copenhagen Conference of 1932.” The Madrid conclusions also “noted that certain progress had been made on the lines indicated in the principal resolutions of the Copenhagen Conference.” Two main ideas were emphasized as a particular result of the Copenhagen Conference,

¹⁰ Second Conference of Governmental Press Bureaux and Representatives of the Press, Madrid 1933, see League of Nations Official Journal, Vol XV, No.2 (Part II).

“namely, freedom of the press, full authentic information communicated as soon as possible to the press.” Eleven interesting resolutions followed, with a number of reservations and declarations by individual delegates. Among the unanimously adopted resolutions were the following two, relating to the International Institute for Intellectual Co-operation, founded in 1926 as the technical secretariat and executive body to the International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation of the League (it can be considered a predecessor of UNESCO):

The Conference,
having noted the first and very notable volume published by the International Institute for Intellectual Co-operation concerning the "intellectual role of the press", which it hopes will be translated into several languages and be circulated as widely as possible.

Addresses its warmest congratulations to the Institute on the successful initial results of this enquiry.

And trusts that the enquiry will be continued with the same success in order to develop, through the press, a better mutual understanding between the nations.

The Conference,
having noted the results of the enquiry carried out by the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation on broadcasting and international relations.

Considers it desirable that the broadcasting services in the various countries should be maintained in such a way as not to affect the good understanding between nations.

And regards it as particularly necessary, in respect of information services, that the agency, newspaper, or

official organization responsible for such services should always be indicated by the transmitting station.

Another resolution concerned the continuation of these conferences:

The Conference,
gratified by the results already achieved in the meetings at Copenhagen and Madrid,

expresses the desire that such meetings should be periodical and that a Committee, appointed for the purpose for each Conference, should be responsible for preparing the organization of the new Conference in agreement with the Government of the inviting country and with the cooperation of the Information Section of the Secretariat of the League of Nations after previous consultations with the various press groups concerned.

However, this resolution was never put to practice. The mounting contradictions in the international political atmosphere paralyzed these activities.

Moral Disarmament

From the very beginning questions related to disarmament got a prominent role at the League of Nations. Woodrow Wilson demanded already during the war that disarmament be made an essential part of the coming peace order. The first paragraph of Article 8 of the Covenant reads:

The Members of the League recognize that the maintenance of peace requires the reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement by common action of international obligations.

There were many prominent men at the League who thought that the most important question was to secure the implementation of the pledges of Article 8 and that the League would probably not survive unless the arms race could be ended and the level of world armaments reduced.¹¹

Also from the beginning, "moral disarmament" was understood as an essential aspect of the general concept of disarmament. Thus, for example, the International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation, founded in 1922, set itself the aims "to work for moral disarmament and international reconciliation by developing intellectual co-operation among countries through the world and to assist scientific work and place intellectual life on a higher level by that co-operation."¹²

The League started to prepare a World Disarmament Conference in 1925 – the year of the first mass media resolution. In December 1925 the Council set up a body, a Preparatory Commission for the Disarmament Conference, to prepare a draft treaty on which the Conference would begin its work. The Council had advised the Commission to concentrate on the technical problems of disarmament only. The obvious problem was that disarmament was not and is not a technical issue. This had already been noted at the First Assembly of the League (1920), which pointed to the necessity of considering the whole series of political, social and economic problems.¹³

It was not until 1930 that the Commission produced a Draft Convention for the Limitation and Reduction of Armaments. It was intended to provide a framework by means of which the limitation and reduction of armaments might be achieved. It was not an agreed upon document; the disagreements were not just between the countries but within them as well. But this gave the coming Conference freedom to consider any other texts or proposals which might be submitted.

At the last session of the Preparatory Commission on 9 December 1930 the delegation of Poland drew the Commission's attention to the particular aspect of security: the achievement of general moral disarmament.¹⁴ The connection between material and moral disarmament was stressed – a point already made in the press resolution of 1925 – and a "moral detente" was considered necessary both for the relations among nations in general and also for the success of the coming Disarmament Conference in particular. The Polish delegation further pointed out the flagrant contradictions between demands for reduction of armaments or demands for total disarmament and an increasingly violent propaganda of hatred tending to promote disorder and even war – false information about other countries which appear in the press. The demand was that by and with the press world public opinion must be convinced of the absolute necessity of practical results in moral disarmament:

¹¹ Noel-Baker, Philip, *The First World Disarmament Conference 1932-33. And Why it Failed?* London 1979, p. 54.

¹² *The League of Nations and Intellectual Co-operation*. Revised ed. Information Section, Geneva 1927, pp. 43.

¹³ Scott, *op.cit.*, pp. 189-190; *Journal of the League of Nations*, No.2, 3 February 1932, pp. 10-11.

¹⁴ Doc. C.4.M.4.1931.IX, pp. 415-416.

It would certainly be possible, by mutual undertaking, to arrest the hate-inspired propaganda; it would certainly be possible to compel States to rectify false information about other countries which is current in public opinion or appears in the Press or in literature; it would certainly be possible to have war propaganda recognised as a crime by the law of all countries. Many other measures could also be contemplated.

The Swedish government also brought this problem and the question of the press to the attention of the Special Committee for the preparation of a Draft General Convention to improve the Means of Preventing War in a letter, dated on 25 April 1931.¹⁵ The letter stressed the function and influence of the press during periods of international crisis:

It is impossible to exaggerate the danger that may arise in such cases from irresponsible press campaigns and the publication in the newspapers of inaccurate or biased reports regarding international relations, and real value might attach to a formal condemnation of such journalistic methods by the Governments. I realise, of course, how dangerous it is to give any impression of wishing to interfere with the principle of the freedom of the press; this principle is one of the foundations of Swedish public law, and the Swedish Government holds that it should in no case be violated. At the same time, there are circumstances in which aggressive propaganda against a foreign Power may take such offensive forms, and assume such a threatening character, as to constitute a real danger to peace. In such cases the Council of the League, when endeavouring to settle the conflict, should be able to discuss what steps can be taken to put an end to such propaganda. This idea has been suggested to me by the President of the Swedish Red Cross, and I think it is worthy of consideration.

As a basis for the Special Committee's discussions, the Swedish Government submitted the following proposal which might have been embodied in the Convention to Strengthen the Means of Preventing War:

The High Contracting Parties undertake to give wide publicity, in the cases referred to in Article 2 of the present Convention, to the Council's recommendations for the maintenance of peace and the settlement of the dispute, and to the statements on the dispute published by the Council.

They further undertake to endeavour, so far as their national laws permit, to suppress all verbal or written propaganda designed to prevent a peaceful settlement of the crisis.

The aim of this proposal was to prevent public opinion from receiving information from one side only. The Committee was in general agreement with the Swedish proposal, but considered that the second paragraph could not be inserted in the Convention in view of the diversity between national press laws and the absence of common legislation.¹⁶ The Drafting Committee adopted on 14 May 1931 the following text as one of the Articles

¹⁵ C.268.M.123.1931.VII/ C. P. G. 2.

¹⁶ League of Nations Official Journal. Vol. XII, No.7, July 1931. Minutes of the 63rd Session of the Council, p. 1457.

prepared for the "Preliminary Draft General Convention to Strengthen the Means of Preventing War":

The High Contracting Parties undertake to provide, by the means at their disposal, such publicity as the Council may recommend for its deliberations and recommendations when a dispute is brought before it in the cases contemplated by the present Convention.

The Polish Delegation took up on the same day (14 May 1931) the Swedish proposal and submitted to the Committee the following resolution¹⁷, which was adopted and further submitted to the Assembly:

The Special Committee,

Being aware of the danger which, in the event of an international crisis, may arise from irresponsible Press campaigns and publicity given in the Press to inaccurate and tendentious information;

Recognising that aggressive propaganda against a foreign power may in certain circumstances constitute a veritable threat to the world;

Requests the Assembly to consider the problem and examine the possibilities of finding a solution.

Also the Spanish delegation, at the 12th session of the Assembly, on 10 September 1931, touched the problem of moral disarmament, from the point of view of the press. The proposal of the Spanish delegation was largely based upon the same consideration as those of the Swedish and Polish delegations: the press could have a great influence on the relations between the peoples, and it is in the interests of peace that the press should receive and spread as correct and impartial information as possible.

The Assembly decided to refer the Spanish draft resolution, which also concerned the co-operation of women in the organisation of peace, for examination to the Third Committee. After consideration the Third Committee decided to treat these two questions – women and press – separately and submitted the following draft resolution¹⁸ to the Assembly:

The Assembly;

Considering that the organisation of peace demands an international spirit freed from all prejudices and misconceptions;

Convinced of the necessity of ensuring that Press information shall be as impartial and complete as possible;

Requests the Council to consider the possibility of studying with the help of the Press, the difficult problem of the spread of information which may threaten to disturb the peace or the good understanding between nations.

The Assembly adopted this text, which in its own indirect manner became to signify how the international situation had begun to deteriorate. It was on the basis of this resolution

¹⁷ C.P.G./Comité de Réd./ P.V.2.

¹⁸ Resolution A.48. 1931, see League of Nations. Official Journal. Special Supplement, No 93, Records of the 12th Ordinary Session of the Assembly. Plenary Meeting. Text of Debates. Geneva 1931; see also doc. Conf. D/CDM/3 March 15th, 1932.

that the Conference of Governmental Press Bureaux and Representatives of the Press was convened in Copenhagen in January 1932.

This landmark resolution – the outcome of Polish, Swedish and Spanish initiatives – was followed by another landmark document: a Polish Memorandum on moral disarmament.¹⁹ Dated 23 September 1931 and addressed to the delegations of the Disarmament Conference, it pointedly emphasized the value and urgency of moral disarmament, and suggested that the question should be examined in its entirety at the Conference. As the memorandum concerned the practical attainment of moral disarmament in its suggested spheres, namely the press, education, broadcasting, theatre, and cinema, it raised the question: "How to counteract movement against peace and assure a moral detente by concerted action of the Governments." The aim of moral disarmament was not merely to disarm men's minds but to transform them with a view to establishing a firm psychological basis for the future development of the international community.

Concerning the role of the Press in the attainment of moral disarmament, the Government of Poland referred to the earlier resolutions on this matter and stated further that the press may exert, during times of crisis but also in daily life, if it so desires, a salutary influence by calming people's minds or it may play a fatal role by causing hatred and mistrust. It suggested some remedies in the latter case: punishment for a person who is the author for a report containing false and tendentious information; right of reply; setting up of an international disciplinary tribunal for journalists for combating newspaper excesses; establishing an international information bureau for preventing the false presentation of the international situation.

Moral disarmament had been discussed for a long time in the League, it was not a new thing, but as it is stated in the Polish Memorandum: "Moral disarmament will make no headway if we rest content with words. What is needed is action."

The Disarmament Conference started its work in February 1932. The General Commission of the Conference had decided to refer the question of moral disarmament to the Political Commission of the Conference, which in turn decided to set up a Committee to study the question of moral disarmament.

The first task for the Committee on Moral Disarmament was to define the various fields it should explore. For this purpose, it instructed a Sub-Committee to prepare the agenda of its work. Having approved its proposals, the Committee established its agenda²⁰ as follows:

1. Questions concerning intellectual co-operation and technical means of spreading information, including the problems of education, utilisation of cinematography and broadcasting;
2. Questions concerning the co-operation of the Press;
3. Questions of a legal character.

The Committee appointed Sub-Committees to study each of these questions. Finally, in November 1933, the Committee produced Preliminary Draft text concerning moral disarmament for insertion in the General Convention for the Limitation of Armaments, which was submitted for examination to the General Commission of the Conference. The text consisted of a preamble and four articles.

¹⁹ Doc. C.602.14.240.1931.IX. Memorandum from the Polish Government concerning the attainment of moral disarmament. See also Journal, No.38, 16 March 1932, pp. 293-295.

²⁰ See Journal, *Ibid.*, p. 295; Journal No 39, 17 March 1932, p. 304, Journal, No 55, 26 April 1932, pp. 441-442; Conf. D/CDM/24. See also Conf. ID/CDM/9.

The preamble of the draft text reads as follows:

The High Contracting Parties,

Considering that moral disarmament is one of the essential aspects of the general work for disarmament;

Considering that the reduction and limitation of armaments depend to a large extent upon the increase of mutual confidence between nations;

Considering that as far as public opinion is concerned a sustained and systematic effort to ease tension may contribute to the progressive realisation of material disarmament;

Considering that the inter-dependence of States calls not only for their co-operation in the political sphere, but also for an effort of mutual understanding between the peoples themselves;

Being resolved to do whatever lies in its power to induce the nationals to display in any public discussion a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect;

Being convinced that the success of the measures adopted in one country to ensure moral disarmament is largely dependent on the application of similar measures in other countries;

Recognising that the League of Nations has placed at the disposal of the various states the Intellectual Co-operation of certain tasks connected with moral disarmament, although a different procedure may have to be adopted to meet special situations.

The four articles deal with questions which made up item 1 of the Committee's agenda: questions concerning education, broadcasting, cinematography and co-operation of the intellectual world – that is only one aspect of the problem of moral disarmament. It was stated that when the Committee comes to deal with items 2 and 3 – press questions and legal ones – articles related to these questions can always be added to the existing text.²¹

The Press Sub-Committee met in June 1932. The Polish delegation submitted on 28 June 1932 a draft resolution concerning the assistance which the Press might afford to the work of moral disarmament. In the draft resolution the part played by the Press in the development of international relations was recognized, and it was proposed that an international conference of qualified representatives of the Press for the purpose of considering the problem of moral disarmament, so far as the Press is concerned therewith, should be convened.

The Sub-Committee adopted the Polish draft resolution as a basis of discussion and wanted to hear the representatives of international journalists on this matter. After this exchange of views, the Sub-Committee proceeded to prepare a preliminary statement which as soon as ready would be submitted to the Committee on Moral Disarmament.²²

However, in December 1933 the Committee was still expecting to consider the question of the co-operation of the Press in the work of moral disarmament. It seems that this consideration was never properly carried out although the necessary data had been collected. Yet in different statements and resolutions the role of the Press was given great importance in the work for moral disarmament and this especially in relation to public

²¹ Conf. D/CDM/36, 20 November 1933. See also Conf. D/CDM/37, 1 December 1933; Conf. D/CDM/19. For the whole process, see Conf. D/CDM/15-39.

²² See Journal, No 98, 30 June 1932, pp. 790-792; Conf. D/CDM/2, 28 June 1932; Conf. D/CDM/24.

opinion; the press was seen not only as the embodiment, but at the same time a great motive power of public opinion.²³

Towards the end of the Disarmament Conference the international situation was deteriorating all the time, and what happened outside the League had severe influence on the fate of the Conference. Philip Noel-Baker, the British statesman and Nobel Prize winner who at the time was Personal Assistant to the President of the Disarmament Conference and later wrote a book about the Conference and on the reasons why it failed, has stated that the chances of success for the Conference would have been much greater if the time for it had been earlier, in 1931 or even 1930.²⁴ The same assessment was confirmed at the symposium "The League of Nations in retrospect", held in Geneva in 1980 where it was stated that "the Disarmament Conference came far too late" and that "the collapse of the Disarmament Conference cannot be imputed to the League of Nations".²⁵

As pointed out by Noel-Baker, in many countries there were people who thought the League and disarmament were utopian nonsense since "whatever you do, war will come". Such an attitude was to be found in certain circles both within and outside governments. It was not only a spontaneous attitude but also something that was deliberately mobilized by anti-disarmament lobbies. For example, in Britain some private manufacturers of arms were eager to support and re-arm Hitler, and this support of the military-industrial complex had all the effect of creating the illusion of public support for the militarist Ministers in the Government.

The same happened in France: since before the World War I, the most important French newspaper, *Le Temps*, was under the control of the Comité des Forges – the Private Arms Manufacturers of France. In 1930 the Comité bought control of *Les Debats*, one of the most important organs of political opinion in France. The Comité acquired control of most of the other newspapers and journals of Paris, too. According to Noel-Baker, through these organs of the Press, the Comité conducted a merciless campaign against the League and its Disarmament Conference in France.

In Germany, the Hugenburg Konzern bought more than half of all the daily newspapers; it bought all the Press Advertising Agencies; it bought *Die Woche* and the other leading weekly and monthly periodicals; it bought the German Film Enterprise, UFA and the new Radio Broadcasting Service. This all was used against the Treaty of Versailles, against the League, against disarmament. And it worked. As Noel-Baker has noted, in this struggle the internationalists have won all the arguments, but the bureaucrats and militarists have won all the material victories that count.²⁶

Modern Means of Spreading Information Utilised in the Cause of Peace

The "modern" methods utilized in the cause of peace became topical at the League of Nations in the beginning of the 1930s, along with the general development of film and broadcasting media. The first manifestation of these media emerging outside the

²³ See in this respect e.g. Journal, No.98, 30 June 1932.

²⁴ Noel-Baker, op.cit., p. 59.

²⁵ Steiner, Zara, Introductory essay, pp. 4-5 and Vaisse, Maurice La Société des nations et le désarmement, pp. 245-265, in *The League of Nations in Retrospect*. Proceedings of the Symposium. Berlin 1983.

²⁶ Noel-Baker, op.cit., p. 4.

conventional press was the attention devoted to the educational use of "cinematography". Thus film was not primarily considered as a political factor related to peace but rather as an educational method within the overall framework of "intellectual co-operation". Obviously cinema as an entertainment and artistic medium had not caused by that time any major international concern, although its moral implications at the national level were from the beginning well realized – film censorship being one of the consequences.

As far as the particular aspect of educational film at the League of Nations is concerned it was not just an incidental question but became an institutionalized part of the International Organisation for Intellectual Co-operation (the latter being one of the four technical organizations of the League, along with those for Health, Communication and Transit, and Economy and Finance). A separate International Educational Cinematographic Institute was established in Rome to "encourage by means of useful action and suggestions the production, distribution and exchange of educational films". Formally speaking, the Institute was parallel to the above-mentioned International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, based in Paris as the historical fundament for post-war UNESCO.

Radio – or as it became to be called by the 1930s, "broadcasting" – was the real "modern means" that captured the attention of international politics at the League. Here also a point of departure was the educational use of the medium: on 24 September 1931 the League Assembly passed a resolution relating to the intellectual co-operation, in particular to an enquiry being carried out by the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation on the educational aspects broadcasting, and this resolution recommended that the enquiry "should cover all the international questions raised by the use of broadcasting in regard to good international relations". The source of inspiration to this extension was obviously the consideration of moral disarmament within the framework of the Conference for the Reduction and limitation of Armaments, in particular the above-quoted Polish Memorandum (dated on 23 September 1931 - the day before the adoption of the league Assembly resolution on intellectual co-operation).

The Assembly resolution of 24 September 1931, backed by the consideration of moral disarmament, launched a five-year process which culminated on 23 September 1936 to the adoption and signing by the Plenipotentiaries of 28 States the International Convention on the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace. An authentic account of the preparations between 1931 and 1936 is to be found in the League of Nations document²⁷ which served as the basis for the diplomatic conference convened in Geneva to adopt the Convention. Excerpts from this document are reproduced as Appendix 1 of this paper.

The adoption of the Broadcasting Convention was nodoubt a landmark, both with regard to the mass media and to the League itself under conditions of the deteriorating international relations. Today when exactly 50 years have passed from its adoption we have all reason to recall its leading ideas - still largely valid, if not even more topical, at the present time of direct broadcasting satellites. An illuminating account is provided by the annual report on intellectual co-operation²⁸, excerpts of which are reproduced as Appendix 2.

A proper analysis of this landmark remains to be done, both in terms of political history and in terms of communication doctrines. Meanwhile, we may subscribe to the words of Egon F. Ranshofen-Wertheimer, who after serving at the League Secretariat,

²⁷ Doc. C.L. 44. 1936.XII. Annex. (Geneva, 16 March 1936).

²⁸ International Intellectual Co-operation 1936. Geneva 1936.

wrote a book about it²⁹, placing the League activities in the field of the mass media in the following perspective:

In later years, when mounting international dangers loomed more and more in the foreground, the accent shifted from technical and professional questions to the broader implications of the work of the press. The discussions centred chiefly around the possibility of combating and rectifying inaccurate news "the dissemination of which may disturb the maintenance of peace and the good understanding between the peoples" without in any way impairing the freedom of the press. In the later stage these deliberations were extended to include the role of broadcasting in international relations. The abandonment of democratic government by an increasing number of countries, and with it the progressive destruction of the liberty of the press and of the professional independence of journalists after 1933, cut short the plans for a continuation of these activities by the League.

These efforts to secure a proper status to international journalists and closer collaboration between official and unofficial elements, and to emphasize the responsibility in the preservation of peace of all those charged with the spreading of news, may not have led to tangible results. But they were part of a great endeavour to strengthen the forces actively engaged in the maintenance of peace. Like similar efforts in other fields of the League's activities, they were not strong enough to prevent the headlong rush to the abyss the moment the accumulated danger elements tended toward open military conflict.

²⁹ Ranshofen-Wertheimer, Egon F, *The International Secretariat. A Great Experiment in International Administration*. Washington Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1945, pp. 213-214.