A guide for researching

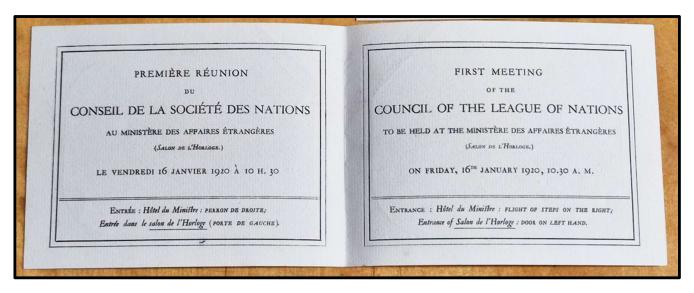
The League of Nations (1920-1946)



Historical background

The League of Nations was founded in 1920 as an international organisation allying the governments of many countries, with the shared goal of cooperation and world peace. The First World War had wrought destruction on a wider scale than ever seen before – a "war to end all wars" – and led to the rising sentiment that an institution was needed to promote international peace and oversee diplomacy.

The League was a key vehicle for international political discussion during the interwar period. Ultimately, however, it was not successful. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, the League failed to bring effective sanctions against member countries who incited military action. Notably, it failed to curb the rising powers of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 was taken as confirmation that the League was ineffective, and it was replaced with the United Nations (UN) in 1946.



Invitation to the first meeting of the Council of the League of Nations, January 1920. From the archive of William Malkin (MALK 1/5)

As an archive service focusing on modern politics and diplomacy, it is unsurprising that we have many items documenting the League, from its foundation to its final days.

These highlights were selected by second year History students at Anglia Ruskin University alongside Archives Centre staff, and they are only a starting point for researchers diving into this topic. We recommend also conducting your own search in our catalogue, ArchiveSearch: https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/9.

Archive of Alexander Cadogan

Sir Alexander Cadogan (1884-1968) was a British diplomat and civil servant who spent decades working in the Foreign Office. Throughout the Second World War, he held the position of Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. A key player in Churchill's wartime government, he was present at major international Allied conferences such as the Atlantic Conference of 1941.

Cadogan was made head of the League of Nations section of the Foreign Office in 1923. He was posted to Geneva as Assistant, later Secretary-General, to the British Delegation. By 1930, he was the Foreign Office's Adviser on League of Nations Affairs. His extensive experience with the League made him Clement Attlee's choice candidate for Permanent Representative of the UK to the United Nations in 1946; he was the very first postholder.



Representatives sitting at the Sixth Assembly of the League of Nations, September 1925 (ACAD 2/1-2)

ACAD 2/1 and 2/2

- Large scrapbooks containing photographs, letters, cartoons, and press cuttings related to sittings of the League of Nations in Geneva, 1924 1931.
- Including general assemblies and notable conferences.

ACAD 1/1

- Cadogan's diary for 1933, covering his last year as British representative to the League.
- Entries discuss the impact upon the League of mounting global tensions, e.g. the findings of the Lytton Report.
- Cadogan also reports on the Geneva Disarmament Conference (1932-1934), which failed to secure joint disarmament, and saw the withdrawal of Nazi Germany from the League.



ACAD 3/2 - 3/8

Opening of the Disarmament Conference, February 1932 (ACAD 2/1-2)

- Letters from Cadogan, while he was based in Geneva, to his wife Lady Theo, 1923-1933.
- A mixture of Cadogan's personal, day-to-day affairs and mentions of League business, e.g. meetings he attended.

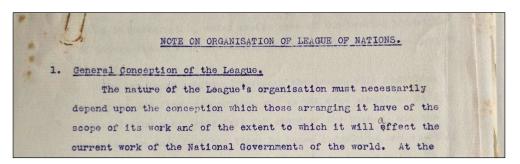
Archive of Lord Arthur Salter

James Arthur Salter (1881-1975) (1st Baron Salter) was a politician and civil servant. In 1919, Salter served as one of the secretaries of the Supreme Economic Council in Paris, and played a critical role in the establishment of the League of Nations. As head of the Economic and Financial Section, he worked on the economic reconstruction of Europe in the aftermath of the First World War.

He resigned from this position in 1931, believing that the League lacked the powers it needed to fulfil its primary mission, and returned to a life of politics, public affairs, and academia in London. Still dedicated to the idea a European union, however, he went on to work with Jean Monnet on concepts that would inform the European Economic Community (EEC), the precursor to the European Union (EU).

SALT 1/4

- Letter from May 1919 to Sir Eric Drummond of the Foreign Office, along with a memorandum about how the League (not yet formed) should be organised.
- The memorandum discusses the potential nature of the League, and questions how extreme its involvement in the affairs of member states would be.
- Notes from October 1925 discussing the "general movement" towards a European consolidation of the League based on the United States' absence, and the lack of South American participation.
- Salter expresses his opinion that this attitude was "dangerous and disastrous".



SALT 1/4

SALT 1/5

- Rough notes from December 1929.
- Salter gives his opinions on a proposed conference inviting member states of the League to negotiate a treaty for a tariff truce.
- The notes are an insight into the inner workings of the League at the beginning of the Great Depression.
- Other documents detail the preparations for the conference, discussing which nations have had Secretariat visits on the matter, and their stances.
- In particular, Salter was involved in talks with Denmark and Sweden to confirm their response to the League's invitation.

SALT 1/6

- This folder focuses on the Greek-Bulgarian crisis of 1925, and contains papers written by Salter in its aftermath.
- The papers discuss the League's management of the conflict, and how it could have better handled the situation in case of a repeat of hostile relations.
- Copy of James Barros' article discussing the incident: 'The Greek Bulgarian Incident of 1925: The League of Nations and the Great Powers'.

Archive of Philip Noel-Baker

Baron Philip Noel-Baker (1889-1982) was a British politician, diplomat, and athlete. Before entering politics, he excelled as a runner, winning a silver medal in the 1920 Olympics. He then served as a Labour Party MP from 1929 to 1970, holding key ministerial positions during this time. Notably, he advocated for disarmament and human rights, for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1959. He left a legacy of public service and humanitarian work.

Noel-Baker played a pivotal role in international diplomacy, contributing to the establishment of the League of Nations and supporting the United Nations. He also kept a huge amount of records from his career – over a thousand boxes! The items highlighted below are just a fraction of items related to the League in Noel-Baker's archive.

Abyssinia Crisis

Two large files contain papers related to Italy's invasion of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) in 1935. The Abyssinia Crisis was a major turning point for the League's reputation, making many believe that the League had less control over member states than it claimed.

Noel-Baker took a vested interest in providing relief to war-torn Abyssinia, and kept documents about events as they unfolded. The files provide valuable insight into the political climate in the aftermath of the invasion, and how it affected British views, on both the League and their relations with other foreign powers like France and Italy.

NBKR 4/1

- Letters, newspaper cuttings, documents, and telegrams from British politicians.
- A letter, dated June 1936, addressed to Clement Attlee (then leader of the Labour Party), criticising the League for Italy's continued presence as a member state, highlighting the hypocrisy of Mussolini being permitted a controlling influence on its decision-making.
- Telegram from December 1935 warning that if the national government continues its path of abandoning the League's Covenant, they will suffer severe political implications.
- Document entitled 'What will the Government do next?', criticising the British
 government's decision to back down on sanctions as an uncommitted approach, ill-fitted to
 resolving the crisis.
- Notes on how the British government should respond to the Abyssinia Crisis, highlighting the dangers of reforming the League with Italy still a member.

NBKR 4/2

- May 1937 article in The Times entitled "Future of the League", which draws parallels between the invasion of Belgium in 1914 with Abyssinia.
- Telegram of May 1937 detailing ongoing relief efforts to provide political aid to the Abyssinian Emperor along with Abyssinians who could not live under Italian rule.
- Telegram of November 1937 from H. Stanley of the Abyssinian Association to Noel Baker, shedding light on the Emperor's financial struggles after the invasion.

Other League activities, 1918-1946

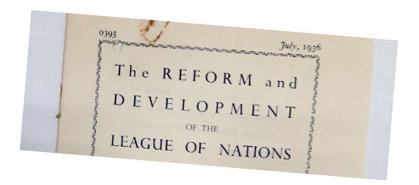
A sequence of 83 files (NBKR 4/435 - 4/517) covers a multitude of League activities, across its whole lifespan. Highlights include...

NBKR 4/467

- Papers related to the Genoa Conference.
- Notes dated April 1922, discussing the British delegations' proposal at the Conference to adopt a pact on non-aggression.
- Notes discussing the nature of the Genoa Conference, highlighting its importance in not being summoned and administered by the League to avoid alienating the non-member states in attendance (Germany and the USSR).

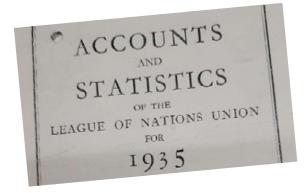
NBKR 4/499

 Pamphlets and cuttings about the push to reform the League of Nations, 1934-1944.



NBKR 4/503

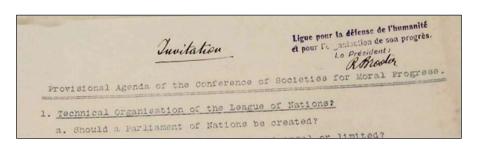
- Papers about the finances of the League of Nations Union (LNU).
- The LNU was a British organisation that advocated for international cooperation through the League of Nations.



- April 1936 booklet detailing membership statistics across the British counties for the League of Nations Union for 1935.
- May 1936 memorandum by Noel-Baker regarding the organisation's finances, along with proposals on how to raise funds in response to the Finance Committee's proposals to cut its budget.

NBKR 4/436

- Various pieces of memoranda, all related to the beginnings of the League.
- Paper from 1922, two years after the League's formation, discussing potential new
 admissions and the impact (of lack thereof) that a change to the Covenant of the League
 would have on many of these said countries.
- Report from 1918 beginning with a prelude on the important events in Europe's history and how they had led to the point of the League being created.
- Other items related to the early League, such as conference agendas, invitations, and correspondence.



NBKR 4/436

NBKR 4/437

• File relating to the voluntary, reciprocal migration of Greek and Bulgarian minorities, one of the many post-Great War issues that the League was set up to administer.

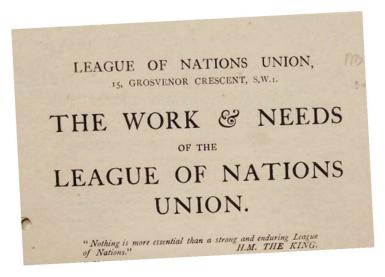
NBKR 4/438 (File 1)

- Correspondence, cuttings, drafts of speeches and reports regarding the League of Nations between 1919 and 1924.
- Disputes between Italy and Greece are mentioned. Meeting notes refer to the League trying to find a resolution.

- 1919 draft documentation relating to the eventual peace deal post-Great War, with mention of Austro-German worries regarding annexation of their former territories, amongst other qualms regarding their surrender.
- Newspaper articles in 'The New Statesman' and 'The Nation and Athenaeum'. A notable contributor was T. S. Eliot.
- Draft Convention for World Peace.

NBKR 4/438 (File 2)

- Documentation and articles reaffirming the rules of the League of Nations in this early period (1919-1924), when they were under consideration.
- Correspondence regarding the future of India, Russia and Africa, as well as the regions around the Persian Gulf.
- The League was also asked to discuss the future of international sports and international trade agreements, which continued to need further examination after the destruction of the First World War.



NBKR 4/439

- Journals, minutes, and papers of the League of Nations Union, 1920-1922.
- At the time, the LNU was the largest organisation of the British peace movement.
- Minutes of the LNU alongside their financial statements of 21st February 1921.
- A pamphlet extolling the virtues of the League, alongside a monetary cheque linked to the treasury of the League. (Minutes of committee meetings placed positive propaganda at the top of the list!)

Archive of Wickliffe Rose

Wickliffe Rose (1862-1931) was an American educator and philanthropist who dedicated his life to improving public health and education. As the first director of the International Health Board, a Rockefeller Foundation division, he led global efforts to combat infectious diseases.

Rose focused on implementing sanitation, nutrition, and disease prevention measures, notably eradicating hookworm disease in the southern United States. He played a key role in establishing public health infrastructure in Latin America. Additionally, Rose advocated for progressive education reforms and served as the president of the American Child Health Association. His contributions continue to shape policies and practices worldwide.

Rose was a key figure in negotiations regarding a collaboration in international health between the Rockefeller Foundation and the League of Nations. Section 3 of his papers is useful for looking at the League of Nations from a public health perspective.

ROSE 3/1A

Documents focused on League of Nations Health Organisation, the World Health Organisation, and public health issues they were focusing on between 1914-1929, including...

- A descriptive paper on the workings of the League of Nations' newly-formed health organisation.
- Correspondence between the American Red Cross and the commissioner to Poland regarding Polish sanitation.
- Papers referring to the Cannes Conferences' solution to the increase in cases of tuberculosis in 1919.
- A financial balance sheet outlining the costs of the programmes related to tuberculosis.

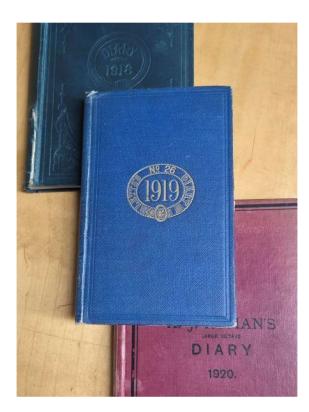
ROSE 3/1B

- Memorandum focusing on the functions of the League of Nations Health Organisation, and outlining expectations of them moving forwards from 1921.
- Correspondence between Rose, his employees and other medical professionals regarding good practice worldwide, and the continuation of the Spanish Flu epidemic into 1922.
- Article from The Lancet discussing the League's relationship with public health in 1922.
- Documentation regarding the development of a Special International Service of Epidemiological Intelligence and Public Health Statistics.

ROSE 3/1C

 Documents mentioning the League of Nations' change of objectives to include public health, not just the avoidance of war.

- Document confirming agreements within the League of Nations Health Organisation on a number of issues, including the commission of epidemiological studies to expand into "sleeping sickness" and tuberculosis in Africa.
- Article discussing Rose's achievement of stemming a typhus epidemic in 1919.
- Staffing costs for the International Health Organisation.
- A report on 'The Scientific Background of International Sanitary Conferences 1851-1938'.
- Ongoing discussion of the Epidemiological Intelligence Service.
- More discussion of public health within the League of Nations in articles from The Lancet,
 1921



Archive of Alexander (Allen) Leeper

Alexander Wigram Allen Leeper (1887-1935) was a civil servant. He had an interesting career, working in the Egyptian and Assyrian Department of the British Museum; at the Department of Information and Foreign Office during the First World War; and rising to become First Secretary in the Foreign Office by 1924.

Between 1918 and 1920, Leeper served on the British Delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, giving him a front-row seat to the meetings that formed the League of Nations.

LEEP 4/1

- Transcript of lecture given by Leeper on the League of Nations in 1932.
- Leeper discusses the activities of the League, as well as the general state of the world and international affairs at this point in history (the economic "Annus Terribilis" of 1931).
- He discusses problems within the League, such as suspicion and fear, and the upcoming Disarmament Conference.

Attendance at Paris Peace Conference

• LEEP 3/8: Letters sent by Leeper to his brother Rex, 1918-1919. Many letters discuss his work and the overall environment in Paris.

LEEP 4/5: Leeper's official pass for the Conference.

against one another. International relations appear at the present time to be dominated by a spirit of fear and suspicion rather than of mutual confidence.

LEEP 4/1

Archives of James & Agnes Headlam-Morley

Sir James Headlam-Morley (1863-1929) was an academic, civil servant, and government advisor. During the First World War, he worked for the War Propaganda Bureau, then progressed to the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office in 1918. He was a member of the Political Section of the British Delegation to the Peace Conference at Paris in 1919, and was involved in drafting the Treaty of Versailles.

Agnes Headlam-Morley (1902-1986) was James' daughter from his marriage to Else Sonntag (see our Suffrage Research Guide for more about Else and her activism). A historian, Agnes specialised in diplomatic history, particularly Anglo-German relations. She was the first woman to be appointed to a full professorship at Oxford University.

HDLM 6/4/30

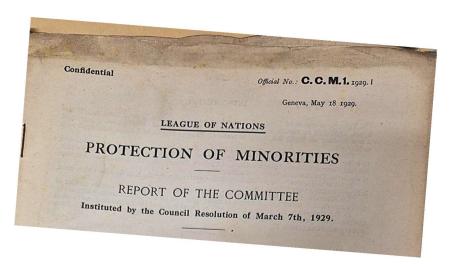
- Minutes of meetings of the Propaganda Committee, May-August 1918, which James was part of.
- As well as discussing propaganda and information sources, the committee touched on Allied plans for a "League of Free Nations" to be established after the war ended.
- The document expresses optimism that most German civilians wanted this as well.

HDLM 6/4/71

- Minutes of a meeting in February 1919 which established the "League of Nations mandates": "classes" of colonial territories which were treated by the League as unable to govern themselves.
- The document discusses which territories should be in which class, and how they should be governed by colonial powers.
- This document particularly shows how the League was established in a context of European empires, revealing the realities of colonial power imbalances, racism, and Eurocentrism that were ongoing while Western European states worked towards ideals of unity and cooperation with each other.

HDLM 6/4/86

- Report of the Committee for "Protection of Minorities" (Minorities Treaties), 1929.
- The Minorities Treaties are considered an important early piece of human rights legislation. They instructed member countries to treat inhabitants with basic rights regardless of factors such as nationality, religion, and race.



AGHM 2/9 - 2/30

- 21 files relating to the Paris Peace Conference.
- Although James died in 1929, Agnes edited and worked on his memoir, which was eventually published over 40 years later as 'A Memoir of the Paris Peace Conference, 1919'.
- She kept extensive notes, drafts, correspondence, and source material on the topic.

Agnes' notebooks

- AGHM 3/1/15: Late 1940s-early 1950s notebook owned by Agnes, containing handwritten notes for a history lecture. The topic of the lecture was the lack of optimism among the young, particularly the lack of trust of the United Nations, and the difference between this and attitudes towards the previous League of Nations.
- AGHM 3/1/26: 1950s notebook containing notes on the League and Germany.



Else, James and Agnes Headlam-Morley at a tea party in 1912 (HDLM 7)

Archives of Maurice & Adeline Hankey

Maurice Hankey (1887-1963) (1st Baron Hankey) was a naval officer and civil servant. His career bloomed during the First World War, when he rose to the position of Secretary of the War Council and then to Secretary of the War Cabinet. After the end of the war, he became Cabinet Secretary, the most senior position in the civil service; he was the first person ever appointed to this post.

During the 1920s and 30s, Hankey attended many notable conferences of the day, including the "Versailles Conference" (an unofficial name for the negotiations of the Treaty of Versailles) and the Genoa Conference. He was accompanied on his work travels by his wife, Adeline (née de Smidt, 1882-1979); they had a strong and supportive relationship.

HNKY 8/3

- Observations by Maurice on the prospective League of Nations, 16 January 1918.
- He states that the "loose organisation" of the Allied Powers in 1918 contained the "nucleus
 of the machinery of the League of Nations", showing how conditions created by the First
 World War led very directly to the League.

HNKY 8/13

- "VERY rough sketch plan" of the League of Nations, created at the Versailles Conference, 31 March 1919.
- Maurice covers areas such as organisation, staffing, finances, the official languages (English and French), and housing and accommodation for representatives.
- Detail about the duties of the Secretary-General and Deputy.
- In 1919, he only anticipated nine countries having representatives within the League –
 indicating how the scope of the League drastically expanded from its initial conception.

HNKY 29/9 - 24/12

- Printed copies of 'The Paris Peace Conference, 1919', published in Washington in 1943 by the US Government Printing Office. Volumes 3, 4, 5 and 6.
- This official history contains occasional highlights and handwritten notes by Maurice Hankey (who was there).

AHKY 1/1/45

• 1933 letter from Maurice to Christopher Hankey, including observations on Hitler leaving the Disarmament Conference.

AHKY 2/3

 Adeline Hankey's account of an incident that occurred while she was accompanying Maurice to the Paris Peace Conference.

Archive of Leo Amery

Leopold Amery (1873-1955) (known as "Leo" or "L. S. A.") was a Conservative politician. In his early career, he was private secretary to an MP, part of the Times' editorial staff, and a Barrister. He became Liberal Unionist MP for Birmingham South (later Sparkbrook) in 1911, although he soon converted to Conservative, and held the seat until 1945.

Amery was very influential as a high-ranking colonial officer. He held the posts of Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Colonies (1919-21); Parliamentary and Financial Secretary to the Admiralty (1921-22); First Lord of the Admiralty (October 1922-February 1924); Secretary of State for the Colonies (November 1924-June 1929); Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs (July 1925-June 1929); and Secretary of State for India and for Burma (Myanmar) under Churchill (1940-45).

Subsequently, there is a wealth of material about the British Empire in his archive – including some material covering the intersection of the Empire and the League of Nations.

Abyssinia Crisis

Amery was British Colonial Secretary at the time of the Abyssinia Crisis. He opposed the British government's decision to impose retaliatory sanctions on Italy. His papers provide valuable insight into the country's internal politics during the Crisis, as well as the broader decline of the League during the 1930s. They can be compared and contrasted with opinions about the Abyssinia Crisis that are present in Noel-Baker's archive.

AMEL 1/5/4

- A selection of material, including letters, newspaper cuttings and telegrams, mostly from MPs congratulating Amery's support for Italian actions during the crisis.
- The items centre on Amery's decision to oppose British sanctions many refer to the necessity of abstaining from the conflict to prevent another World War.
- 21 October 1935: Letter from T. Belshaw voicing displeasure that Britain's League representative has harmed Anglo-Italian relations by not supporting Italy's military action.

- 13 Octoer 1935: Telegram from Harold K. Hales noting the League's past allowances (e.g. Japan's incursion into Manchuria) and stating that there was no point taking a stand against Italy.
- 6 October 1935: Newspaper cuttings from the Sunday Referee detailing economic anxiety owing to Britain's sanctions on Italy.
- List of 8 points for objections to military sanctions against Italy, ranging from the League overstepping its boundaries into becoming an "armed-super-state", to fears that Italy would abandon the League and France would fall into fascism.

AMEL 1/5/6

- Correspondence expressing concern over the nature of Britain's sanctions towards Italy during the crisis, scrutinising the efficiency of the sanctions, with emphasis towards the economic impact on the nation and the impact on Britain's international prestige.
- 1 October 1935: Letter from the editor of the Times, detailing frustrations with the League's inability to properly respond to Italy's aggression.
- Summary of Amery's speech on the crisis, providing insight into the British policy for the boycott, and emphasising no intent for war with Italy.
- 1935 letter detailing Amery's personal objections against trying to force Italy to stand down, feeling it would only end in war.

Other League events

AMEL 1/5/27

- Papers concerning the struggle for disarmament, 1932-1937.
- Copy of the government's declaration on disarmament policy, 1932.
- Draft disarmament convention, 1933.
- Government memorandum for the 1934 Disarmament Conference.
- Exchange of notes between Britain and Germany on the limits of naval armaments.
- Journal for the German Association for League of Nations Questions, on the 1938 Disarmament Conference and naval armaments.



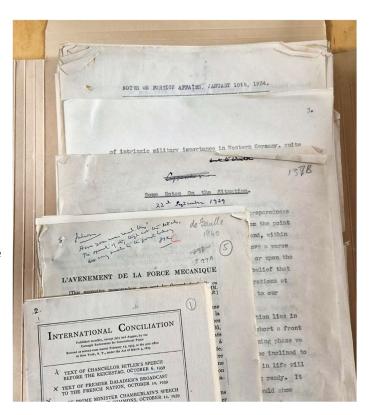
AMEL 1/5/62

- Speech notes by Amery on the failure of the League as a peacekeeping force.
- Pamphlet issued by the League on the reform and development of the League.

 Journal of the German Association for League of Nations Questions, on the 1936 disarmament conference.

AMEL 1/5/68

- Fortnightly bulletins on foreign affairs sent by Amery to W. S.
 Robinson, between 1934 and 1940.
- Subjects include the League of Nations, and the many activities taking place within Europe during this period: the remilitarisation of the Rhineland; the Spanish Civil War; Germany's treatment of Jews; China and Japan; Britain's guarantee to protect Poland; negotiations with the Soviet Union; activities in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and France.
- Also prints of speeches by European leaders including Hitler, Chamberlain, and de Gaulle.



AMEL 6/3/45

- Letters sent by Amery during his 1925 tour of the Middle East.
- Topics include the League's handling of the "Mosul question", mediating between Britain and Turkey.
- The Mosul question was a territorial dispute over lands that were formerly part of the Ottoman Empire which Britain claimed sovereignty over. The newly-formed Kingdom of Iraq and ethnic Kurds also claimed a right to the land. The League sided with Britain.

AMEL 1/4/15

- Annotated texts of speeches given by Amery in New Zealand, on his "Empire Tour", 1927.
- One includes comparisons between the British Empire and the League of Nations.

Miscellaneous items ...

William Malkin's memorabilia (MALK 1/5)

- Sir Herbert William
 Malkin's memorabilia from
 attending the Paris Peace
 conference.
- Including his official pass; postcards of Paris and Versailles; invitations to the signing of various treaties; and invitations to the first meeting of the Council of the League of Nations.



Invitations to signings of WW1 peace treaties (MALK 1/5)

Walter Crocker's memoir (CKRK)

- Volume of memoirs by Sir Walter Crocker (1902-2002), an Australian colonial officer.
- Crocker worked at the League of Nations' International Labour Office in Geneva between 1934 and the outbreak of the Second World War.
- In section 5 ('Geneva: The League of Nations Fails'), he describes his experience being part of the League in the months and years leading up to WW2.
- He discusses the groups of representatives (mentioning the disproportionate dominance of white European members), and life and culture for those living in Geneva.
- (Please note: this item contains terms that are offensive and outdated.)

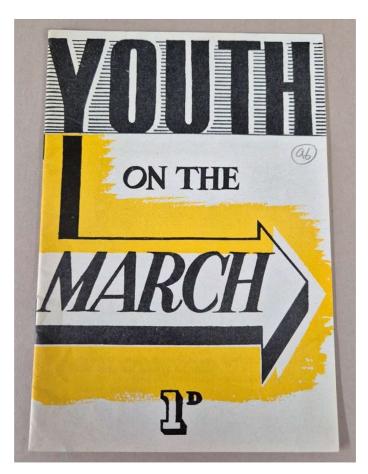
Lecture notes by Admiral Ramsay (RMSY)

- Admiral Sir Betram Home Ramsay is best known for coordinating "Operation Dynamo" (Dunkirk) in 1940.
- 2 files in his collection (RMSY 4/2 and 5/5) contain notes for lectures about the League, delivered to the Royal Navy War College (1927) and Imperial Defence College (1933).
- Composed for a military audience, with the prospect of future war on the horizon.

• The notes indicate that distrust was known to be a major factor hindering the League as early as the late 1920s.

Papers of Viscount Thurso (THRS)

- Archibald Sinclair Thurso's involvement with the League of Nations Union led to 4 boxes of LNU material existing in his collection (THRS II 76-79).
- Items are dated 1936-1939.
- Mostly correspondence, meeting agendas, funding appeals, and some promotional materials.
- The tension of the mid/late 1930s is evident in the documents, with agendas mentioning global unrest (especially the Abyssinia Crisis) and refugee displacement.



- Material relating to the LNU's collaboration with other organisations striving for peace, including Christian organisations and the International Peace Campaign.
- Some items give insight into 1930s youth peace activist groups who were allied with the LNU. Including the first World Youth Congress of August-September 1936, and the National Youth Campaign's "pilgrimage" for democracy.

Leaflet for the National Youth Campaign's pilgrimage. Thousands of young people marched to London as a protest for peace. (THRS II 79/3)

Nicole Allen, Archives Assistant, 2024