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MYRTHE L. BARTELS  
NEJRA NUNA ČENGIĆ  
LIGIA DECA  
NEDA DENEVA  
M R. X. DENTITH  
MADELEINE LYNCH DUNGY  
ALESSANDRO NANNINI  
IDA LIBERA VALICENTI  
GUY WOODWARD

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Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

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New Europe College

Str. Plantelor 21

023971 Bucharest

Romania

[www.nec.ro](http://www.nec.ro); e-mail: [nec@nec.ro](mailto:nec@nec.ro)

Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



## **MADELEINE LYNCH DUNGY**

Born in 1986, in the United States

Ph.D. in History, Harvard University (2017)

Thesis: *Peace, Power, and Economic Order: International Rivalry and Cooperation in European Trade Politics, 1900-1930*

New Europe College Fellow, International Program, grant awarded by the Romanian Agency for Higher Education and Research Funding (2018-2019)

Researcher, Norwegian University of Science and Technology

### Fellowships and grants

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Dissertation Research Fellowship, Krupp Foundation, Center for European Studies, Harvard University (2015-2016)

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Georges Lurcy Traveling Fellowship (2014-2015)

Clarendon Scholarship, University of Oxford (2010-2011)

Participation in conferences in Austria, Australia, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, the United States, and the United Kingdom



# ECONOMIC MIGRATION IN THE EARLY LEAGUE OF NATIONS

## Abstract

This article analyzes how economic migration was addressed in the technical institutions of the League of Nations and in the International Labor Organization (ILO), during the initial period of institutional genesis after the First World War. New archival material is used to integrate the fragmented scholarship on migration cooperation and establish dialogue with broader research on the development of international economic governance in the 1920s. This transversal analysis highlights commonalities and interactions that cut across institutional boundaries. Within the League system, different economic institutions carved out limited areas of cooperation in migration policy, while collectively reaffirming national sovereignty over borders and population.

**Keywords:** League of Nations, International Labor Organization (ILO), migration, international governance, economic cooperation

## I. Introduction

In the early 1920s, migration was flagged as an issue of concern in nearly every branch of the young League of Nations. There were large volumes people on the move at a time when national governments were trying to control immigration more stringently. While governments had already begun to introduce migration restrictions in the late-nineteenth century to manage the expanding flows of people moving along railroad and steamship lines, the First World War marked a watershed because it produced sudden spikes in movement and a substantial reinforcement of border controls. Millions fled battle zones during the war, and the segmentation of the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires into nation-states pushed millions more across new borders.<sup>1</sup>

After the war, governments sought to regulate access to domestic labor markets more tightly, reflecting a concern that demobilization would result in domestic unemployment and political unrest. The war had

strengthened organized labor and empowered working-class voters just at the moment when the Russian Revolution offered a radically destabilizing model of social and political change. Attempted communist coups in 1919 in Bavaria and Hungary fed anxiety about Bolshevik contagion. Across Europe, foreign economic elites were also distrusted as potential agents of a hostile power or potential allies of a hostile local minority. This negative attitude towards outsiders was in tension with the program of macroeconomic stabilization embraced by the League of Nations and the affiliated International Labor Organization (ILO).<sup>2</sup> In 1920, a short-lived postwar economic boom tipped into crisis. Commodity prices plummeted, unemployment rose across much of the industrialized world, and a turn to austerity provoked new social conflict.<sup>3</sup> Leaders in the ILO and the League took it for granted that general economic stability would not be restored unless workers, merchants, investors, and engineers could start moving again.

Throughout the League system, economic migration was flagged as an important and intractable issue that was repeatedly raised and then side-stepped. In the early 1920s a string of conferences and commissions met to discuss economic migration, but they all ended up focusing on narrow procedural questions and reaffirming national governments' undivided authority over fundamental immigration policies related to foreign nationals' admission and economic participation. The ILO, the League's Economic Committee, and its Organization for Communications and Transit all participated in this process of institutional compartmentalization, as they addressed different aspects of migration. The Economic Committee – the League's trade body – was concerned with the movement of commercial elites and firms as bearers of capital and expertise. It issued standards governing foreign commercial agents' legal rights and the operation of foreign subsidiaries. The Organization for Communications and Transit promulgated new passport and visa norms in order to ease physical mobility. The ILO approached migration as factor in unemployment, and it set up a temporary Emigration Commission and a permanent internal administrative unit to address the matter. Although these organizations pursued different objectives in their migration policies, they shared a common reluctance to address admission, the process through which governments grant entry to their territory. International debates also skirted questions of residency and labor-market access, which were sometimes handled during admission and sometimes through supplementary local permits. In sum, the League and the ILO refused to

tackle what was and still is commonly understood as core immigration policy. They agreed to incorporate a set of narrowly circumscribed issues into the international transit, trade, and labor agendas, leaving national governments free to manage the rest.

International efforts to facilitate economic migration during this period have not been systematically analyzed across the full League system. Historical studies of international migration policy have focused heavily on the issue of asylum.<sup>4</sup> There was an arm of the League of Nations that was specifically dedicated to this issue – the High Commissioner for Refugees. In contrast, work on economic migration was spread across the ILO, the Organization for Communications and Transit, and the Economic Committee. Migration was not a central priority for any one of these bodies and so it has not figured prominently in the otherwise rich new scholarship tracing the emergence of international economic and social governance in the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> Although migration was of secondary importance in the League's individual economic institutions, it was noteworthy in its ubiquity. It was a common thread that ran through international cooperation in commerce, labor, and transit, and there are good studies of international migration policy in each of these areas.<sup>6</sup> This article integrates this previous research and offers a new transversal analysis highlighting commonalities and interactions that shaped the systemic development of international economic governance during the crucial years of institutional genesis following the First World War.

The research on economic migration presented here is tied to scholarship on population politics and sovereignty in the League system. The transition from multi-ethnic empires to nation-states created large groups of minorities, stateless people, and mobile foreigners across Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, claims to territory and political authority were based on the demonstration of ethnic and linguistic homogeneity.<sup>7</sup> The League developed an array of institutions to manage the tension between unity and diversity, most notably a minority protection regime. The League's system of minority protection was widely resented by the states under its purview as an infringement on national sovereignty, although its practical efficacy was limited.<sup>8</sup> Several recent studies have emphasized that the League of Nations was not a club of equal and fully sovereign members but rather a framework to manage different forms of contested political authority in the long transition from a world of empires to a world of nation-states.<sup>9</sup> The authority to manage national population

through immigration controls became a central arena in which national sovereignty was defined and contested.

Scholars of international governance emphasize that nation-states have continued to dominate migration policy, even as binding multilateral regimes have developed in other areas. The 2000s brought a realization that there was, in fact, quite a lot of migration cooperation above and between states, but that it was often indirect and dispersed across many different treaty structures, agencies, and NGOs. Scholarly efforts to develop a more comprehensive analysis of “global migration governance” have accompanied a practical drive to create a more coherent multilateral framework, culminating in the UN’s 2018 Global Compact for Migration.<sup>10</sup> Leading scholars of global migration governance today acknowledge that the core multilateral institutions were established during the interwar period.<sup>11</sup> However, historical scholarship on interwar international migration policy remains highly fragmented and uneven. A fuller analysis of this period of genesis shows that international institutions helped consolidate national sovereignty over migration even as they carved out limited areas of cooperation.

## **II. Passports**

The League of Nations held a conference on migration before the League Assembly met for the first time, reflecting the sense of urgency attached to this issue.<sup>12</sup> In October 1920, the League’s Committee for Communications and Transit hosted a Conference on Passports, Customs Formalities, and Through-Tickets. This was part of a broader effort to rebuild the infrastructural sinews of the world economy as the first step in postwar reconstruction. Transportation was a top priority for the nebulous web of organizations that bridged the Paris Peace Conference and the League of Nations. The Committee for Communications and Transit reunited many of the experts who had served on the Commission of Ports, Waterways and Railways at the Peace Conference. Its first order of business was to lay plans for a permanent Organization for Communications and Transit in the League of Nations to coordinate the resumption of rail and fluvial traffic in Europe through a series of multilateral conventions.<sup>13</sup>

In 1920, passports figured on the League’s transit agenda because they were seen as an obstacle to the resumption of European rail travel.<sup>14</sup> The original impetus for cooperation on passports came from the Conference



of Ambassadors, an association of Allied ambassadors that formed to supervise the execution of the Peace Treaties.<sup>15</sup> In June 1920, acting on reports that diplomatic personnel had been subjected to “excessive and arbitrary” customs and passport controls on the Paris-Warsaw train line, the Conference of Ambassadors demanded action from the League Secretary General.<sup>16</sup> After falling out of use in most of Europe in the nineteenth century, passports were reintroduced during the First World War in neutral and belligerent countries, alike. Wartime passport requirements were justified on security grounds, and many hoped that they would be lifted after 1918 as part of the return to civilian life.<sup>17</sup> Yet, in the face of postwar economic and political instability, governments clung to passports as a tool to exclude foreign nationals perceived as “undesirable” including “unemployed people, vagabonds, spies, political agitators, and people engaging in stock-market speculation.”<sup>18</sup> Since passport and visa requirements could not be eliminated, the League Committee for Communications and Transit sought to standardize and streamline them. In interwar Europe, passport-holders generally had to obtain exit and entry visas for their point of departure and final destination as well as transit visas for all the countries they passed through. Transit visa requirements were onerous after 1919, as Central and Eastern Europe was crisscrossed with new national borders.<sup>19</sup>

The rationale behind the Committee for Communications and Transit’s work on passports was largely economic.<sup>20</sup> In his opening speech at the League’s 1920 conference on passports in Paris, the French Minister of Public Works declared:

public opinion is impatiently awaiting, everywhere, the resumption of former and normal conditions, and you are fully cognizant of the fact that anything which hinders personal relations between producers of all countries, creates a grave obstacle, preventing the resumption of commercial exchanges. This obstacle ought to be removed as soon as possible.<sup>21</sup>

He suggested that the status of the conference attendees “as technical people” rather than diplomatic delegates should enable them to rise above political tensions to achieve cooperative solutions. In practice, this meant that the experts who gathered in Paris were not authorized to open international dialogue about the core questions of migration policy. Following this principle, the 1920 conference focused narrowly

on the transit phase of migration and avoided debate about labor-market participation. The conference emphasized procedural questions, pronouncing on the duration, price, and method of delivery for visas and passports. It established a template for an “international type” of passport, with four pages containing a standardized set of personal details and twenty-eight further pages for stamps and visas.<sup>22</sup> The conference did not, however, cover emigration for employment, except a brief discussion of fees. Robert Haas – the General Secretary of the conference and the head of the secretariat for the Organization for Communications and Transit – announced categorically that “all questions studied by the conference do not concern the passports of emigrants.”<sup>23</sup>

The conference struggled to draw a clear line between travel and emigration. It passed a resolution stipulating that entry visas should ordinarily be valid for one year, so that frequent travelers need not seek re-authorization for each trip. This prompted a heated debate about whether an entry visa automatically implied a right to stay. Robert Haas argued that entry visas would be pointless without the right to stay in a destination for at least a few weeks. Yet, numerous other delegates insisted that the right to stay could not be addressed through international norms because it was an internal “police” regulation. Ultimately the conference could only agree to a negative formulation, specifying that a one-year travel visa did not entail the right to stay for an entire year.<sup>24</sup> Just how long a person could visit on a travel visa was left to the discretion of national governments.

The League’s Organization for Communications and Transit developed extensive supervisory functions on the basis of the passport conference in 1920. Governments were asked to report whether and when they implemented the conference resolutions and to send updates about general changes in passport and customs formalities. The first collection of responses was published in 1922 and then a further batch in 1925, in preparation for a second passport conference. These surveys indicate that the most widely adopted innovation introduced at the 1920 conference was the uniform “international type” of passport. By 1925, over twenty countries reported that they were using the standard League format for their passports, while many others had adopted most of its features.<sup>25</sup>

The passport resolutions issued in 1920 affirmed the general principle that facilitating “personal relations between peoples of various countries” would aid in the “economic recovery of the world”, but they included no specific measures concerning labor-market access or commercial

activity.<sup>26</sup> This pattern was replicated in the second passport conference that the League hosted in 1926. This gathering did cover “questions relating to emigrants”, but, once again, discussion was limited to transit between states and not formal admission.<sup>27</sup> Thus, although the League’s Organization for Communications and Transit approached passports as an economic problem, it introduced a novel model of internationally protected travel that was legally separated from economic participation.

### **III. The “Treatment of Foreigners”**

While the Organization for Communications and Transit concerned itself only with travel between states in order to avoid thorny questions of admission and residency, the League Economic Committee took the opposite approach. The Economic Committee’s work on the “treatment of foreigners” sought to protect foreign commercial agents who had already been admitted to a host country but largely disregarded how they got there. The Organization for Communications and Transit and Economic Committee shared a common legal foundation: Article 23(e) of the League Covenant. This was a pledge to “make provision to secure and maintain freedom of communications and of transit and equitable treatment for the commerce of all Members of the League.”<sup>28</sup> This one line was the legal basis for all of the League’s technical economic work, and formal responsibility for explaining its meaning fell to the Economic Committee.<sup>29</sup>

The Economic Committee responded by creating a special Sub-Committee on the Equitable Treatment of Commerce, chaired by the British trade official Hubert Llewellyn Smith.<sup>30</sup> At the Paris Peace Conference, where he had served as Britain’s top trade expert, Llewellyn Smith had attempted to define “equitable treatment” in a single comprehensive multilateral convention. Due to the complexity of postwar economic conditions, the Sub-Committee on Equitable Treatment decided against this course. Many states faced extreme monetary instability and were using trade restrictions to conserve hard currency, while others invoked concerns about security or domestic social relations.<sup>31</sup> In this context of upheaval, the Economic Committee decided to begin modestly “by enumerating various classes of practices, which, in their judgment clearly violated the principle of the equitable treatment of commerce” and then to define specific solutions for each category. The committee placed a heavy emphasis on feasibility, focusing on areas “which appear to offer

the best prospects of securing international agreement." These actionable priorities included the "treatment of foreign nationals and enterprises."<sup>32</sup>

The "treatment of foreigners" was on the agenda of the Sub-Committee on Equitable Treatment because it had been flagged as a key problem at the Genoa Conference of 1922. The Genoa Conference was an attempt by the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, to strike a comprehensive economic and political settlement that would complete the work left undone by the Paris Peace Conference. Germany, Austria, and Soviet Russia were all in attendance. One of the conference's central goals was to restore economic and commercial relations among the imperial successor states of Central and Eastern Europe. Its work on the "treatment of foreigners in the conduct of business" was a direct extension of the League's cooperation on passports. The Genoa Conference issued an exhortation to implement the League passport norms from 1920, as well as a new recommendation that foreign nationals and firms should be taxed at the same rates as locals.<sup>33</sup> Although limited in scope, these provisions provoked vigorous debate. The German delegation attempted to turn the provision on equal taxation into a much broader set of principles governing judicial protection of foreign nationals and firms, commercial samples, property rights, and shipping rights. A more limited Romanian proposal that focused specifically on taxation was adopted.<sup>34</sup> There was also lengthy discussion about whether the norms agreed upon should be implemented by means of a binding treaty or simple recommendations.<sup>35</sup> The Genoa Conference ultimately decided to adopt non-binding recommendations and authorized the Economic Committee to supervise their implementation.<sup>36</sup>

When the Economic Committee took over negotiations on the "treatment of foreigners" from the Genoa Conference, it considered converting the non-binding resolutions that had been agreed upon into a formal multilateral treaty. Daniel Serruys, the French member of the Economic Committee, had participated in the Genoa Conference and argued strenuously against a multilateral convention, recalling the "fiercely debated discussions at Genoa which had raged over this question." He observed that "for many of the new countries this question had an important political side. Moreover, many of these countries were in different stages, and there was no possibility of securing agreement."<sup>37</sup> They had strongly objected to "making super-laws over-riding national legislation" at the Genoa Conference, according to Serruys.<sup>38</sup> In response to Serruys's concerns, the Sub-Committee on Equitable Treatment agreed

to offer simple recommendations in lieu of a formal treaty. This procedural caution provoked renewed debate about the question of “admission,” however. Shinjiro Matsuyama, the Japanese member of the Economic Committee, argued that since they were limiting themselves to mere recommendations, they could afford to be more ambitious in the substance covered – they should “look ahead to ultimate ideals.” Notably, he argued that admission should be explicitly mentioned as “a vital aspect of the equitable treatment of commerce.” In effect, this was a bid to use League’s commitment to commercial “equality of treatment” to revive the unmet Japanese demands for racial equality from the Paris Peace Conference and thus create an international normative basis to contest anti-Asian immigration restrictions. At the Peace Conference, Japanese delegates had linked racial equality in migration to demands for free trade in the colonial world.<sup>39</sup> Serruys and Llewellyn Smith emphasized that the Sub-Committee on Equitable Treatment had adopted feasibility as a central criterion for its agenda and suggested that tackling a controversial question such as migrant admission would place the Economic Committee’s broader work at risk. In the end, the Economic Committee decided to exclude admission from its recommendations, with the proviso that:

The committee does not dismiss the extreme importance of this aspect of the problem. It is firmly convinced that the principles established in the Covenant, concerning the equitable treatment of commerce are no less applicable to the admission of foreigners for purposes of commercial activity than to the treatment to which they are accorded after their admission.

The Committee’s report explained that “in the present circumstances” international norms concerning conditions of admission would “have little chance of being generally accepted” and might “endanger” the implementation of related measures.<sup>40</sup> In 1923, the Economic Committee issued a set of non-binding guidelines concerning the equitable treatment of foreign nationals and firms in taxation, property rights, and judicial protection. In 1925, it published further guidelines concerning access to certified professions. Both sets of norms were limited to foreign nationals and firms that had already been admitted to foreign territory.

In 1923, the initial decision to avoid the question of admission was presented as a temporary expedient to shield the fledgling Economic Committee from toxic controversy. Yet, this exclusion became a permanent

feature of the Economic Committee's work and a perennial source of conflict. When the Economic Committee decided to transform its early recommendations into a binding Draft Convention on the Treatment of Foreigners in the context of the League's 1927 World Economic Conference, it once again excluded admission.<sup>41</sup> Populous states of emigration, especially Germany and Japan, continued to contest this omission. At a convention for Rotary International in 1931, Matsuyama described "the economic aspects of the movements of population" as "one of the greatest and most vital problems of today" and argued that it should be a central focal point for League cooperation. Matsuyama called for a comprehensive approach that would address migration in relation to both foreign trade and industrial employment, but by that time these questions had been separated by ten years of divergent legal and institutional practice in the Economic Committee and the ILO.<sup>42</sup>

#### **IV. International Labor Standards**

Scholarship tracing the ILO's origins in pre-war international social reform movements reveals the genesis of a distinctive approach to migration based on a scientific understanding of unemployment.<sup>43</sup> In the 1920s the ILO strove to produce a more integrated picture of world migration through a massive statistical survey at a time when intercontinental mass migration was declining, especially across the Atlantic.<sup>44</sup> The ILO primarily responded to this change by advocating bilateral treaties to stabilize new regional migration corridors, with multilateral cooperation limited to promoting migrants' access to social insurance in their host countries.<sup>45</sup> In its bilateral migration diplomacy, the ILO treated migration policy largely as a question of matching unemployed workers with job openings in foreign countries according to their specific skills. This model can also be linked to the ILO's role in the interwar movement for the scientific management of industrial production.<sup>46</sup>

Migration was discussed in the Unemployment Commission of the ILO's first annual International Labor Conference, held in 1919 in Washington, DC. The conference authorized the ILO to appoint an expert commission to study migration and to create a new unit dedicated to migration in its Geneva secretariat, the International Labor Office. The Washington Conference also sponsored a Draft Convention Concerning Unemployment that included provisions related to migration. This

agreement committed national governments to create public employment exchanges and to coordinate their operations internationally through the ILO. It also established the principle of reciprocity in unemployment insurance, specifying that states which provided unemployment insurance should negotiate agreements to grant foreign workers access to this benefit. The Washington Conference passed a broader non-binding recommendation advocating the “reciprocity of treatment of foreign workers” in all areas of social protection.<sup>47</sup>

Although the decisions of the Washington Conference were relatively limited in scope, they were hotly contested. The Canadian Secretary for External Affairs, Newton Rowell, declared:

I think I speak for the sentiment of the nations on this continent, north and south, when I say they will control the character of their own population; they will do it fairly and honourably, but they will not accept any international determination as to who should compose their own population or be entitled to the rights of citizenship or the rights which citizens should enjoy within their own territory.<sup>48</sup>

Rowell warned that the future development of the fledgling ILO would be hampered if it adopted an excessively broad agenda embracing topics that many states considered to be internal matters. As discussed above, similar arguments about feasibility and institutional survival were used to limit the Economic Committee’s work on the “treatment of foreigners” and the cooperation on passports in the Organization for Communications and Transit.

Within the ILO, there was concern among labor representatives in countries of immigration that reciprocity in the provision of unemployment insurance and other social benefits would undermine local protection for workers in the receiving countries. The Canadian Minister of Labor argued that a norm of reciprocity could discourage states, such as Canada, which did not yet provide comprehensive unemployment insurance, from doing so. He also suggested that the notion of “reciprocity” was not relevant to migration because there was not an even exchange of migrants but rather a large unidirectional movement from Europe to the new world.<sup>49</sup>

The Emigration Commission created by the Washington Conference exposed a conflict between the ILO’s political leadership and its staff over the scope of international cooperation on migration. Harold Butler, the British deputy director of the ILO, argued that the Commission must be

circumscribed, declaring that “it will be necessary to define its terms of reference very carefully so as to avoid provoking national susceptibilities as far as possible.” He quoted Rowell’s admonitions at length to highlight the strong opposition of “American countries” to any international intervention in their migration policy. He was particularly worried about antagonizing the US government. Although the US Senate rejected League membership by refusing to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, ILO leaders initially held onto hope that the United States might be willing to participate in some forms of labor cooperation. Butler questioned whether the Emigration Commission “can have any value without the assistance of the United States”, given its political heft as a destination country.<sup>50</sup> In the 1920s US immigration policy underwent a dramatic shift that set the pace for other countries to adopt more restrictive measures. The United States had been a key destination for global mass migration in the nineteenth century. Following the First World War, it introduced a wide range of new restrictions that built on previous measures directed against Japanese and Chinese migrants, including a novel system of geographic quotas that reduced overall immigration rates to the country by more than one half.<sup>51</sup> In this context, ILO leaders went to great lengths to try to secure US participation in the Emigration Commission, but to no avail.<sup>52</sup>

While many ILO leaders hoped that the United States and other major immigration countries might eventually be persuaded to join a moderate program of international cooperation, the main official who was responsible for preparing the work of the Emigration Commission, Louis Varlez, was more ambitious. Varlez was a veteran Belgian social reformer who led the Migration Section of the ILO secretariat. He conducted a survey of thirty-one governments and outlined an expansive cooperative program.<sup>53</sup> Varlez proposed that the ILO establish a permanent “organ of international coordination” to centralize and distribute information about laws, labor-market conditions, recruitment practices, transportation, and colonization initiatives. It would arbitrate disputes between states of emigration and immigration and would also prepare multilateral conventions on a wide range of topics including social insurance, access to courts, remittances, and professional education. Varlez wanted the ILO to intervene directly in migration administration. He recommended that the ILO assess a tax on migrants to be paid directly by continental migrants and indirectly by shipping lines that transported inter-continental migrants. The funds obtained would finance the appointment of local agents who would supervise migration procedures in both sending and



receiving countries. He also proposed that migrants be required to fill out a statistical survey for the ILO as part of national passport control procedures. Significantly, Varlez supported the consolidation and not the removal passport restrictions. Indeed, he wanted passport requirements to be made universal in order to create a regulatory framework to collect migration data.<sup>54</sup> Varlez outlined the maximalist vision of international migration governance during the early years of the League and thus provides a useful benchmark to assess the institutional limits placed on cooperation in this area.

Albert Thomas, the Director-General of the ILO, did not directly discourage Varlez. Thomas was himself preoccupied with problems of “overpopulation” in Europe and was interested in developing international mechanisms to match unemployed workers to available jobs.<sup>55</sup> Yet he also did not want to take big risks that could damage the institutional authority of the ILO. He cautioned the president of the Emigration Commission, George Cave, not to exceed the bounds of political possibility. He argued that it was the “duty” of the commission to “prioritize very precisely the questions and to determine clearly up to what point governments can follow us.” He signaled the danger of “provoking the apprehensions of all those who are afraid to see the formation in Geneva of a super-government.”<sup>56</sup> Thomas allowed Cave, as the political leader of the Emigration Commission, to restrain Varlez’s ambitious vision of international bureaucracy. Cave was intimately familiar with British migration administration having served as Home Secretary from 1916 to 1919. He was selected as commission president because it was thought that a British president would be able to serve as an honest broker between countries of emigration and immigration, since the British Empire included both. Significantly, Britain’s imperial prestige was also seen as an asset because ILO leaders considered “colonization” to be an important path for the relief of Europe’s unemployed.<sup>57</sup> When Cave had to withdraw a few months before the Emigration Commission was set to meet, he was replaced by another Briton, James Lowther.

Cave and Lowther devised a more modest agenda for the Emigration Commission than Varlez had originally proposed. They rejected Varlez’s plan to invest the ILO with authority to intervene directly in migration administration and advocated reinforcing national regulations in many areas, calling for tighter restrictions on labor recruitment services and migration agents. They supported coordination between national governments, notably in the operation of labor exchanges, but they did

not assign the ILO an intermediary role in this process. They argued that the equality of workers' legal treatment should be handled through diplomatic negotiation at the ILO's annual conferences and not settled in a specialist inquiry. The only area in which they accorded the ILO an autonomous role was information, recommending that it facilitate the standardization and collection of migration statistics and also serve as a central repository for legal texts.<sup>58</sup>

When the Emigration Commission met in August 1921, it further winnowed down Lowther and Cave's plans. The commission simply advised governments to create public employment exchanges and make them available to immigrants but made no mention of coordination mechanisms. It suggested that international recruitment should be managed by individual states through bilateral treaties. This latter resolution was a compromise between countries of emigration (Germany and Italy), which favored uniform international standards to prevent exploitative recruitment practices, and countries of immigration (Canada, France, and South Africa), which demanded wide government discretion. The other key point of contention in Emigration Commission was the functions of the ILO itself. Here, the lines of cleavage were less clear-cut. A Brazilian delegate suggested that the Emigration Commission should be transformed into a permanent "organ of conciliation" between countries of emigration and immigration. Numerous delegates aligned against this proposal. They insisted it was sufficient to maintain a Varlez's small Migration Section within the ILO secretariat. They authorized this unit to "investigate the question of co-ordination of legislation" but left responsibility for this coordination to the ILO's political branches, namely its annual conference and its Governing Body. Significantly, Albert Thomas intervened personally and quite firmly to counter the Brazilian bid to extend the work of the Emigration Commission. He suggested that this would likely be ineffective and could undermine the overall authority of the ILO: "the real danger lay in the fact that the competence of this Commission might be seriously contested, and that matters might be placed before the Commission which it was powerless to settle." He recommended instead that the ILO form ad-hoc expert committees to focus on the least controversial areas of migration policy, such as hygiene during transit.<sup>59</sup>

The Emigration Commission sketched out the path that the ILO subsequently followed in 1920s. The ILO collected a vast store of information on migratory movements and national legislation and sponsored some narrowly targeted expert inquiries.<sup>60</sup> Its main task was

to establish uniform labor standards through international conventions, and this effort included some measures to ensure foreign nationals' equal access to social protection. Generally, however, the ILO promoted cooperation on migration through bilateral negotiations rather than international treaties.<sup>61</sup> In the 1920s, the ILO intervened more directly to support refugees than voluntary economic migrants.

## V. Economic Migrants and Refugees

In the League system, refugees were not economic migrants, in formal legal terms. Indeed, this was a defining innovation of the interwar refugee regime – before 1918 governments rarely distinguished between different kinds of migrants based on their motivation for leaving their place of origin. Governments often gave asylum to those fleeing different forms of political turmoil but generally did so within the same legal and institutional framework that applied to all other migrants.<sup>62</sup> This changed during the interwar period. By 1938, a leading scholar on the subject who had participated in the League's refugee work wrote, "the refugee is distinguished from the ordinary alien or migrant in that he has left his former territory because of political events there, not because of economic conditions or because of the economic attraction of another territory."<sup>63</sup> Paradoxically, the ILO was able to provide more direct economic support to refugees than it did to ordinary workers on the move. When the ILO's Emigration Commission decided against a centralized system of job placement for industrial migrants, Albert Thomas was laying plans to provide this service for refugees.

The refugee crisis escalated after the end of the First World War with the defeat of the anti-Bolshevik White Russian forces in 1919-1920 and the onset of famine in Russia in 1921-1922. An estimated one million Russians fled to neighboring countries during this period. They included many White Russian soldiers and many civilians. There was also a large outflow of Jews, who faced violence from both sides of the Russian Civil War.<sup>64</sup> Russian refugees either lacked identity papers or carried passports from the defunct Russian Empire, and they were often unable or unwilling to obtain new passports from Soviet Russia. Thus, the International Committee of the Red Cross (hereafter, ICRC), which coordinated support for refugees in the immediate postwar period, concluded that they "no longer have any legal nationality."<sup>65</sup> This became a central criterion for

defining refugees during the interwar period; refugees were people who had lost the diplomatic protection of one government without acquiring a new nationality. Not all such stateless people, however, were given international assistance. Geographic, ethnic, and religious criteria also applied. Only certain groups from certain countries were legally protected in the League system, chiefly Russians, as well as Christians from the former Ottoman Empire. The refugee administration also helped manage the voluntary and involuntary population transfers that were undertaken to align nationalities with borders, for example the Greco-Turkish exchange of 1923.<sup>66</sup>

In League circles, the postwar refugee crisis was often analyzed in economic terms. In the early 1920s, refugees were heavily concentrated in countries neighboring Russia, which faced high unemployment and acute shortages of foreign currency, notably Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Romania, Turkey, and Yugoslavia. These states had few resources to sustain large refugee populations and also offered limited opportunities for local employment. In Greece, the League used the leverage of an international loan to try to support the large-scale resettlement of Christians from Turkey by promoting local economic development.<sup>67</sup> The League sponsored more limited programs to foster economic activity among refugee populations elsewhere, while also working to move refugees onward to new destinations in Western Europe or overseas.<sup>68</sup>

In the early 1920s, Albert Thomas was centrally involved in efforts to establish a more unified institutional framework for the disparate postwar efforts to support refugees. In late 1920, the ICRC asked the ILO to set up an "Emigration Office" to help find employment for refugees. Thomas determined that the ILO could not itself sponsor such an agency but agreed to back any efforts in this direction that the ICRC wished to undertake.<sup>69</sup> In 1921, Thomas supported the creation of a League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a post given to the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen. In the discussions leading up to the creation of the High Commissioner for Refugees, employment was flagged as a crucial issue.<sup>70</sup> At a meeting in February 1921 Gustav Ador, the head of the ICRC, affirmed that it was a top priority to "sort the capable and the incapable, to verify who wants to emigrate and who wishes to stay, in short to use the labor forces that remain unproductive in the Orient." "Incapable" individuals included the elderly, the sick, and orphans, and they were considered to have the strongest claim to philanthropic aid.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, Thomas suggested that many refugees were not in a condition to take up employment because their "morale and their energy" had been undermined by an excess of

“charity.”<sup>72</sup> He argued forcefully that the League should appoint a central official to enforce “discipline” among the refugees and among the panoply of relief organizations. In practice, Nansen had to run his administration on a shoestring and relied heavily on independent philanthropic organizations.<sup>73</sup> After Nansen’s appointment, the ILO worked closely with his office to try to find employment for refugees.

Many members of Nansen’s staff shared Thomas’s aversion to “charity.” Thomas Frank Johnson, Nansen’s personal secretary and later his assistant, complained of “lavish expenditure by Governments and private organizations on unconstructive – not to say destructive – lines, either in indiscriminate feeding or doles, which thoroughly demoralized the refugees.”<sup>74</sup> Nansen and his team defined the problem of refugee resettlement largely as a matter of matching individuals with job openings. They also undertook various initiatives to encourage refugees to find local employment, in any line of work. Indeed, Johnson declared, with a fair bit of exaggeration, that “there was scarcely a restaurant or café in Constantinople where Russian women, of the most exalted families, were not serving as waitresses.”<sup>75</sup> Johnson and his colleagues even advised the organizations that were providing food assistance that refugees should be “struck off the relief lists” if they did not accept a job that was offered to them.<sup>76</sup> Nansen negotiated with governments to resettle groups of refugees from specific professions.

The ILO provided many different forms of support for refugee employment. It used its network of affiliates to coordinate specific job placements, and it also undertook more systematic initiatives. Notably, in 1921-1922 it conducted a census of Russian refugees in different countries, by gender, marital status, profession, and religion and also asked governments to report job openings that could potentially be filled by Russian refugees.<sup>77</sup> The first census was a major organizational undertaking, but it only covered a small proportion of the refugees in Europe. The ILO counted 45,000 refugees, whereas League estimates at the time indicated that there were roughly 800,000 in Europe.<sup>78</sup> The low rates of participation in the ILO census can be explained by the fact that many governments did not differentiate between refugees and other categories of migrants in their internal statistics. Consequently, the ILO was often only able to count people who were in direct contact with aid organizations.<sup>79</sup> The census did help reduce the postwar refugee problem to relatively manageable proportions. It became a question of finding jobs for four hundred unemployed woodworkers or one thousand seamstresses instead of 800,000 undifferentiated refugees. In a context of general

economic crisis, the ILO focused on finding small skill deficits in countries experiencing general unemployment. For example, Austria agreed to accept 1500 farmers while Bulgaria accepted fifty-five teachers and their families. Alongside these relatively modest international job placements, the ILO also helped promote local employment through refugee labor exchanges in Greece, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. These exchanges were managed by Nansen's staff, but the ILO helped set them up.<sup>80</sup>

In 1925, the administration of the League's refugee work was actually transferred to the ILO in order to accelerate job-placement, although Nansen retained ultimate political authority.<sup>81</sup> Varlez and Thomas welcomed this move as an opportunity to try to implement plans for the management of global migration that had been stymied in the Emigration Commission.<sup>82</sup> In 1925, the ILO subsequently undertook a more extensive survey of refugees, counting one million including roughly 250,000 unemployed.<sup>83</sup> During the period when the ILO had primary responsibility for refugee administration, from 1925 to 1929, it resettled roughly 50,000 people. The largest share went to France, which experienced critical labor shortages during the first half of the 1920s and became the main European country of immigration. Thomas, Varlez and other ILO officials had close ties to the evolving French migration administration and to French-based associations promoting social reform. Their skills-focused, statistics-based approach aligned closely with the administrative practices and ideology that governed French migration policy during this period.<sup>84</sup> The ILO decided to give up its responsibilities for refugee work in 1928 because Thomas concluded that the ILO had reached the limits of its organizational capacity; the remaining unemployed refugees either could not work or had professional skills that were hard to place.<sup>85</sup>

In the League system, the problem of refugee employment was closely linked to passports. In 1921, the League Secretary General identified employment and "legal status" as the two key issues on Nansen's agenda.<sup>86</sup> Without identity papers, refugees could not travel to find work. To address this problem, Nansen convened a diplomatic conference in July 1922 to establish a special identity certificate for Russian refugees, which was later also later extended to Armenian, Assyrian, and Assyro-Chaldean refugees. This "Nansen Passport," as it was colloquially known, gave the holder the right to travel to other countries participating in the scheme but did not denote citizenship. Forty-five governments agreed to implement the Nansen passport, and altogether they issued roughly 155,000 documents. The Nansen passport was a central component of the job-placement

program undertaken by the ILO and became a key constraint on its efficacy. Many of the refugees who were offered work in a foreign country were unwilling to renounce their Russian citizenship definitively in order to gain employment that often did not fit their skills, under a precarious legal status. The standardization of passports by the League of Nations Organization for Communications and Transit underscored the limitations of Nansen's version, which granted only the right to leave a host country for a new destination and not general freedom of circulation.<sup>87</sup> In sum, although refugees received more direct administrative support in the League system than voluntary economic migrants, they had markedly weaker legal protections, establishing a stark and novel differentiation between migrants and refugees. The relationship between humanitarian relief and economic autonomy has remained a highly contentious area of refuge policy.<sup>88</sup>

## **VI. Conclusion**

Economic migration was widely debated across the League system during the formative postwar years. A transversal analysis of this issue highlights the linkages between the objectives of social conciliation advanced by the ILO, the program of postwar macroeconomic stabilization pursued by the League's trade and transit bodies, and the system of humanitarian assistance that developed under the High Commissioner for Refugees. The League's labor, trade, and transit institutions all sponsored early migration initiatives, producing new international standards governing passports, the legal treatment of foreign firms and commercial agents, and foreign workers' access to social insurance. Yet, although League bodies established some limited normative and institutional authority in these areas, they simultaneously reaffirmed national governments' undivided sovereignty over the core issues of migration policy: admission and workforce participation. This was part of a process of institutional genesis, as international officials sought to protect the young League of Nations by defining feasible policy objectives and side-stepping difficult problems. In this context, it is significant that League officials and collaborators did not avoid the topic of economic migration altogether. In fact, they discussed migration a great deal and deliberately decided not to tackle the more divisive aspects. This meant that over the course of the 1920s, new positive models of international economic order emerged in Geneva that specifically marginalized migration, while also establishing new legal and institutional distinctions between economic migrants and refugees.

## NOTES

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