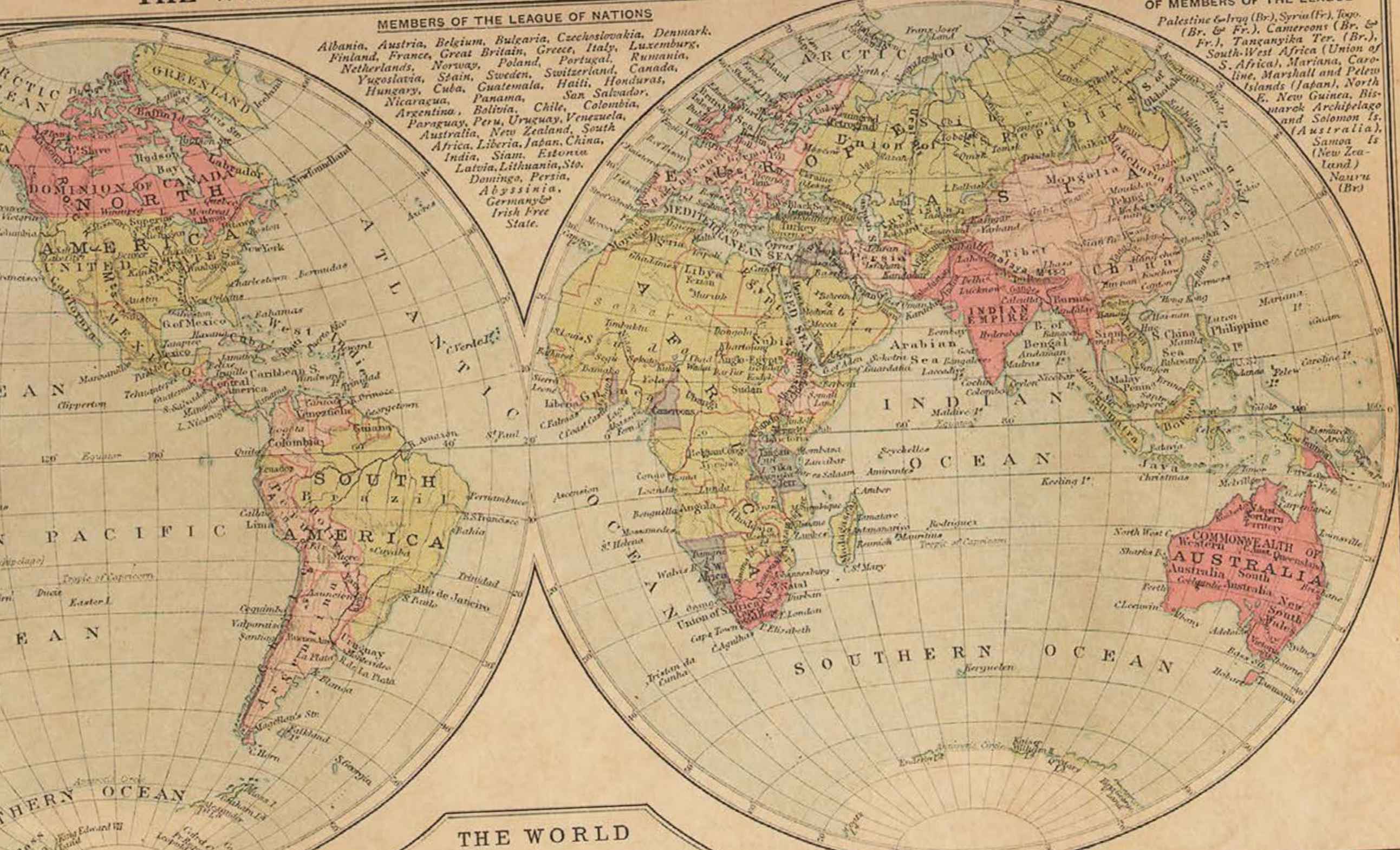


THE WORLD SHOWING THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS



The League of Nations

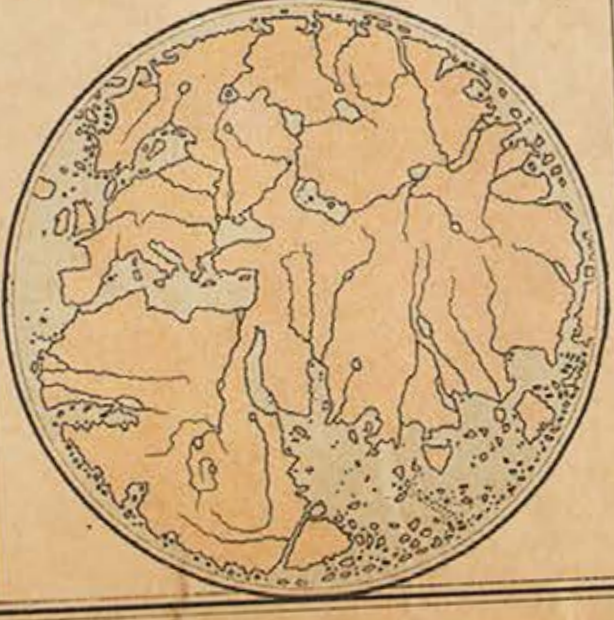
Ireland takes her place among the Nations of the World

THE WORLD as known at various periods.

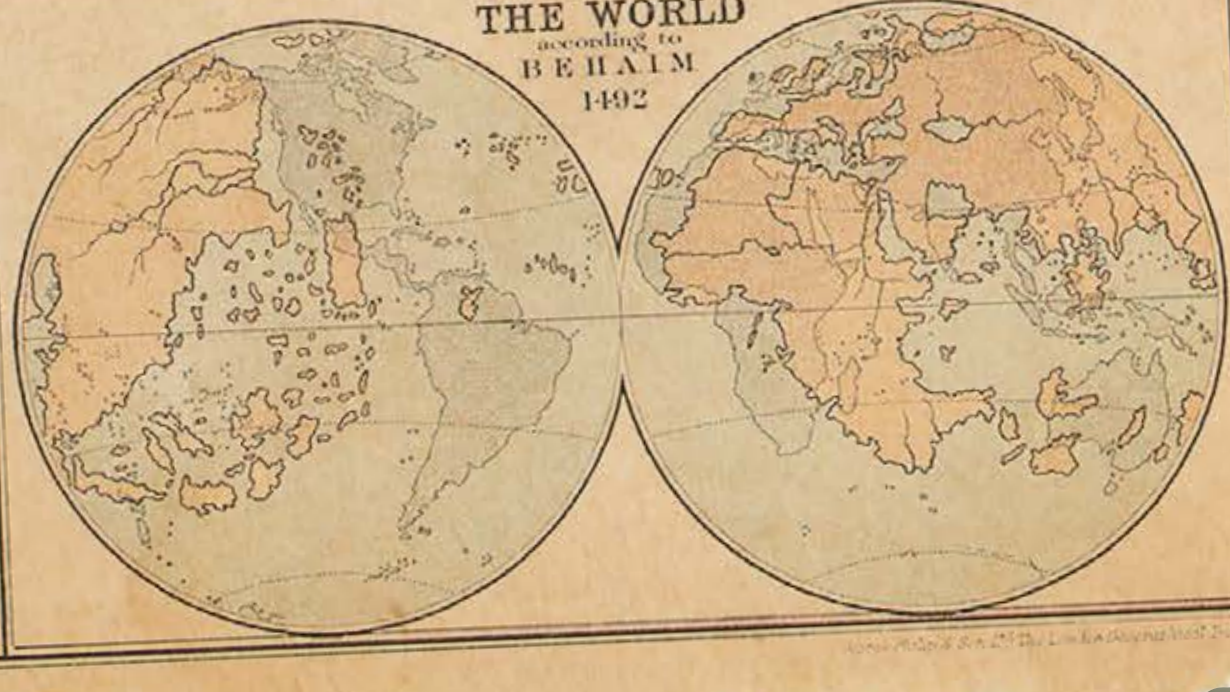
THE WORLD according to EDRISI:1154



THE WORLD according to FRA MAURO:1459



THE WORLD according to BEHAIM 1492



An Online Exhibition Commissioned by Limerick Museum
Researched and Curated by Craig Copley Brown



The League of Nations

Ireland takes her place among the Nations of the World

In the aftermath of the Great War, the nations of the world were more determined than ever to unite in the common goal of maintaining global peace and promoting greater international cooperation. Wary from the devastating losses brought about by war, many countries came to the realisation that diplomacy and negotiation with one another, were the most effective means of avoiding further conflict. While Ireland was a small, neutral, and relatively underdeveloped country on the international political stage, it played a key role in the development of what became the League of Nations (1920-46).

As Ireland marks 100 years since joining the League, this exhibition will examine the country's involvement in the organisation, until its dissolution in 1946.

This exhibition is part of the Limerick City and County Council's Decade of Centenaries Programme, which is organised by Limerick City and County Library Service and funded by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media under the Decade of Centenaries 2012-2023 initiative.



The World showing the League of Nations, 1929
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**An Online Exhibition Commissioned by Limerick Museum
Researched and Curated by Craig Copley Brown**



The Great War, 1914-18, and its aftermath

During the first years of the twentieth century, it became clear that the successes and interests of many of the world's nations related directly to the political alliances that existed between one country and another. One of the main reasons behind the frantic nature of the declarations of war in June 1914, after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was because of the historic alliances that existed between certain European nations. The four years of war that followed left the nations of the world reeling after one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history. By the time an armistice was declared on 11 November 1918, official estimates record that some twenty million people, both active military personnel, and civilians, perished in the conflict, while a further twenty-one million were wounded. It must be noted too, in the context of this exhibition, that approximately 200,000 Irish men enlisted in the armed forces, with an estimated 35,000 of those being killed during the course of the war.

The savagery of this conflict, and the heavy losses sustained, were a direct result of a war which was fought on land, at sea, and in the air, where new modes of warfare had been tried and tested. The introduction of advances in military hardware such as tanks, airplanes, heavy artillery, and machine guns, combined with the introduction of chemical warfare,

meant that armed combat had changed forever, and the world now faced much greater threats in terms of international conflict.

The Great War served as a profound turning point for the world, as the threat of annihilation through armed conflict became a frighteningly real possibility for many countries. Spurred on by this new realisation, many nations now turned their attention to promoting international cooperation and political dialogue.



The Nine Kings of the major European Kingdoms met at Windsor in 1910
Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. [△](#)



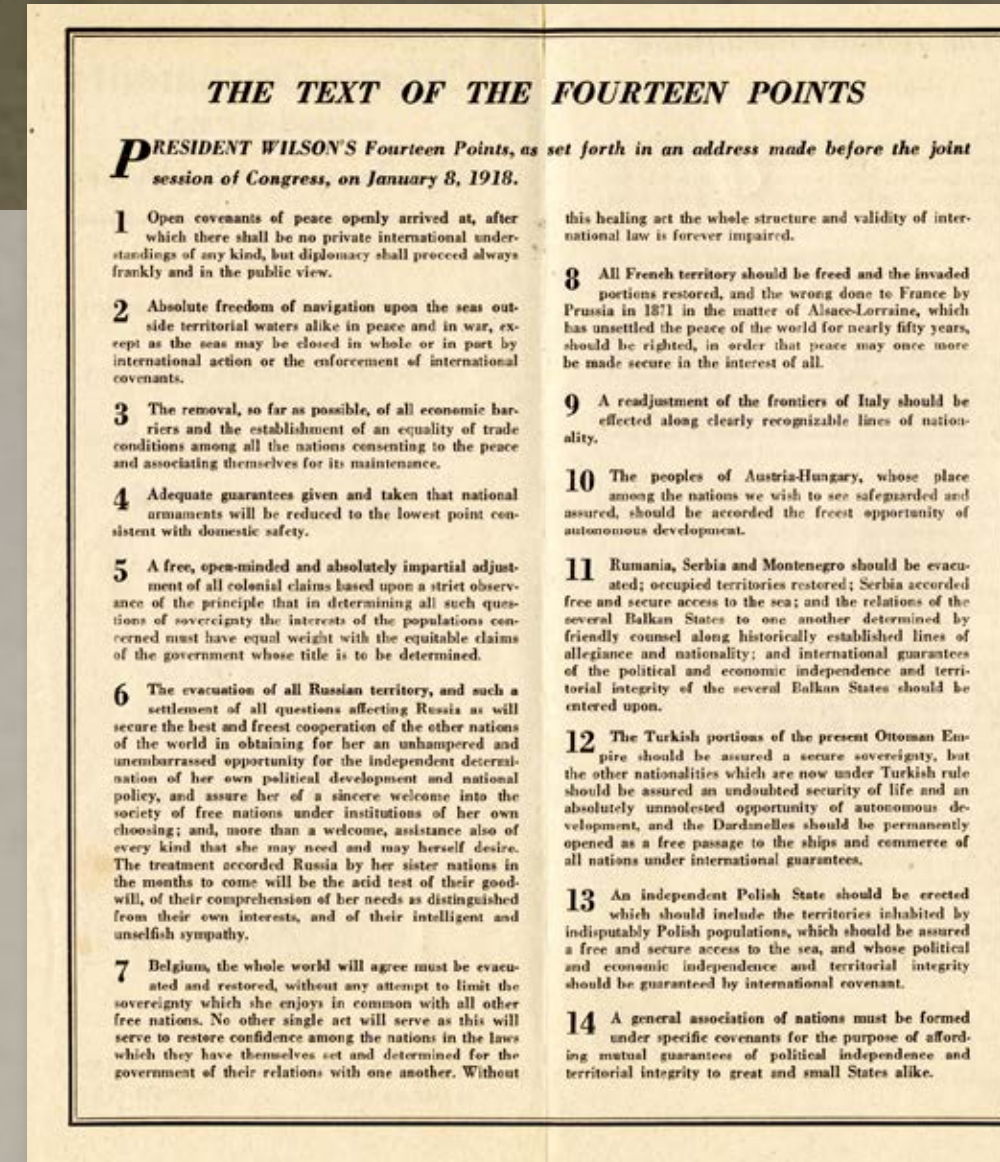
Australian infantry from the 45th Battalion using small box respirators at Ypres,
27 September 1917 Public domain, Wikimedia Common. [△](#)

The 11 November Armistice and the Treaty of Versailles; the world strives for peace

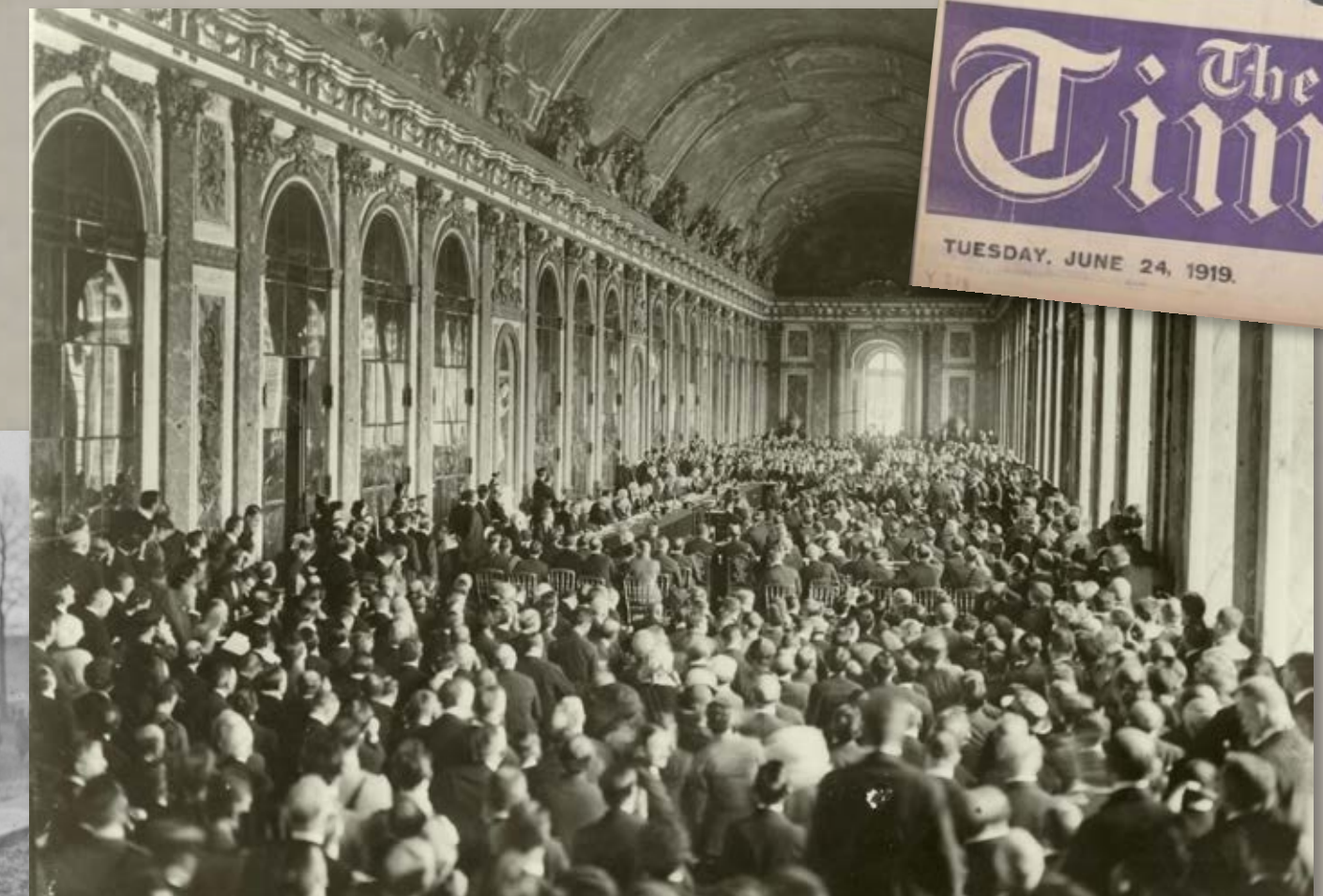
Firstly, one of the great logistical challenges which faced negotiators at the end of the Great War, was the question of a treaty, or peace agreement which would be acceptable to all sides. The United States, headed by President Woodrow Wilson, was one of the first nations to actively take the lead in promoting peace talks. One of Wilson's greatest contributions to this cause was his 'Fourteen Points' statement, which he delivered to the US Congress on 8 January 1918, some 10 months before the armistice in Europe was agreed. These points were made on foot of research carried out by the Inquiry, a group of approximately 150 American academics who had been tasked with making recommendations for peace negotiations to deal with the issue of re-drawing national borders in post-war Europe. Wilson believed that in order to achieve peace, and an end to this worldwide conflict, countries would need to move beyond nationalistic objectives and ambitions and turn towards greater global interaction and cooperation. This included adopting foreign policies which would see diplomacy conducted in public, rather than in private.

While Wilson's views on nationalism seem quite reasonable in the context of a world war, they challenged the political practices of many of Europe's nations, who had formed their own empires upon the principles of nationalism, and self-interest. The Fourteen Points nevertheless succeeded in influencing negotiators at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 during the drafting of the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty achieved peace in Europe, but at a very heavy cost to Germany, owing to the war guilt clause (article 231), which forced Germany and the other Central Powers to accept sole responsibility for causing the war and thus liable to pay reparations to the Allies. This particular aspect of the treaty created anger in Germany throughout the interwar period.

President Woodrow Wilson, during the review of troops at the peace conference mission in France, Christmas Day, 1918. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. ▷



A summary of President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, January 1918. Public domain. ▷



The signing of the Treaty of Versailles in the Hall of Mirrors, 28 June 1919. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. ▷

The Times placard 'Germany will sign' concerning the Versailles Treaty, 24 June 1919 Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. ▽



The emergence of the League of Nations

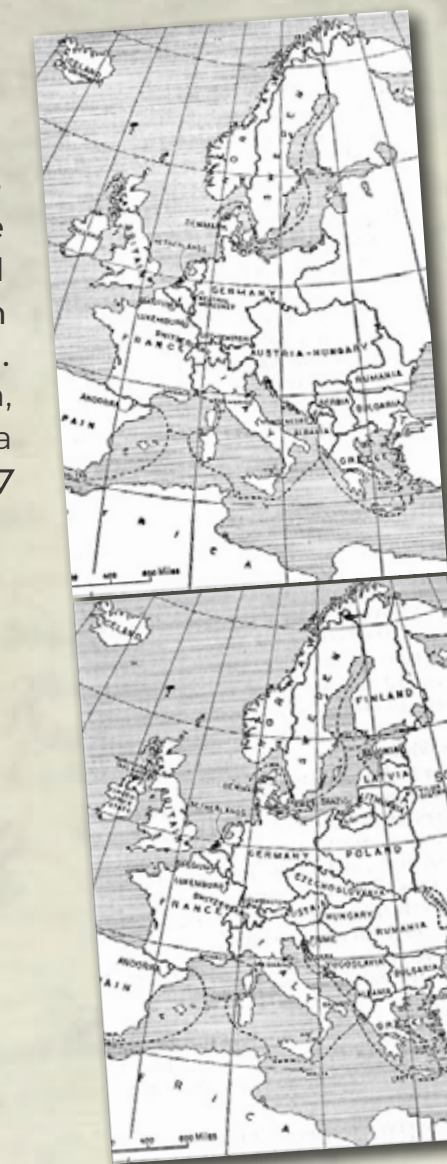
With the terms of peace now secured, and world war now a distant memory, the eyes of many nations turned towards rebuilding political dialogue and promoting greater cooperation between countries. Modern international law in the west was a phenomenon which had only existed since the signing of the Geneva, and Hague Conventions in the later half of the nineteenth century. The establishment of a League of Nations was intended to build upon the work of these earlier movements, while adapting to the changes in international relations after the Great War.

Having been formally ratified within Part I of the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June 1919, the Covenant of the League of Nations laid the groundwork for the expansion of the organisation in the interwar period. The League itself formally came into existence in January 1920, with its first Assembly meeting taking place in November of the same year. Its headquarters were situated in Geneva, Switzerland. Initially, its membership stood at 42 countries. The League met in person via its General Assembly, where representatives from member nations could gather to resolve disputes, discuss national defence, and generally improve cooperation. The policies of the League included the promotion of disarmament,

striving to improve global welfare, and preventing war through collective security.

Despite President Woodrow Wilson, and the United States, having heavily influenced and supported the founding of the League, the US never became a member. The American Senate defeated two attempts to approve the Treaty of Versailles, which contained an agreement to join the League. Citing concerns over their sovereignty and decision-making powers, the United States never reconsidered joining.

A map of Europe showing the changes to national borders between 1914 (T) and 1924 (B). Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. ▽



The fourth meeting of the League of Nations in Geneva, September 1923. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons ▷



The New York Times publishes material promoting Woodrow's idea of a 'League of Nations', Christmas Day, 1918. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. ◀



A cartoon from December 1919, pointing to the reluctance of the US in joining the League of Nations. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. Δ

Ireland in the early 1920s

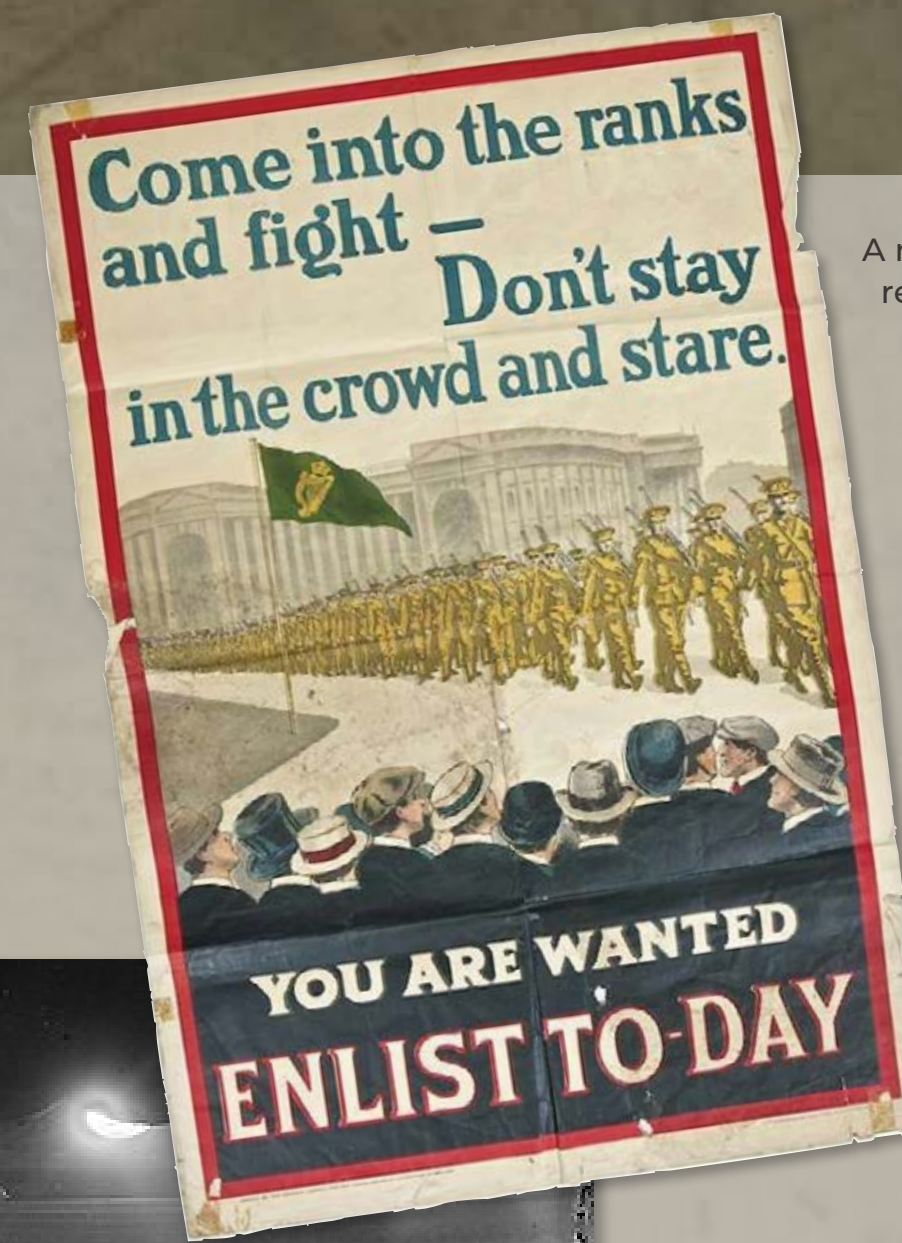
At the meeting of the first Dáil on 11 April 1919, Éamon de Valera, delivering his speech in Irish, stated that it was fitting that Ireland should undertake the duties of a free country by engaging in any form of international organisation which promoted the use of peaceful negotiation and dialogue between all nations. However, he expressed doubts about the League of Nations, which the victorious Allied Powers were in the course of setting up, due to their vengeful policies towards Germany, calling the approach 'tyrannical' in nature. Similar views from Harry Boland, expressed suspicion regarding the involvement of the British Government in the drafting of the League's aims. After a lengthy debate on the matter, TDs voted to proceed with seeking membership of a League of Nations, on the grounds that it supported equality of rights between powerful and weak nations, as laid out in President Wilson's Fourteen Points.

By 1922, Ireland found itself in a radically different position to the one it had occupied at the beginning of the Great War in 1914. The 1916 Rising, War of Independence and Treaty had produced an independent Ireland, though at the cost of partition

and a bitter civil war. With the progression of the Irish independence movement, it was felt that efforts should be continued to interact with international organisations, on behalf of the people of Ireland.



A meeting of Dáil Éireann, August 1922. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. [Δ](#)



A recruitment poster for Irish regiments during the Great War. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. [Δ](#)



Éamon de Valera. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. [▽](#)



Irish Civil War Troops in Limerick, 1922. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. [Δ](#)

Ireland's move to join the League of Nations, 1921-1923

After the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, and the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, the most important goal for Ireland was to consolidate its political and economic independence. Although still a dominion of the British Empire, and a member of the British Commonwealth, Ireland embarked on a foreign policy campaign of its own. This marked a major turning point for a country that had previously been absorbed in its own domestic struggle for freedom.



Michael MacWhite, Ireland's first permanent delegate to the League of Nations. Public domain, US Library of Congress. ◀



A copy of the constitution of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann), 1922. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. ◀

With the Dáil being keen to keep its finger on the pulse at Geneva, a diplomatic office was established there, and Michael MacWhite, an accomplished emissary and former member of the French Foreign Legion, was appointed to act as Ireland's representative to the League of Nations. MacWhite played a crucial role in the timing of Ireland's membership application to the League, as well as helping to overcome potential stumbling blocks. One initial setback to the nation's application was the size of the Irish Free State's standing army, which stood at some 32,000 individuals by November 1922. This particular issue had the potential of undermining the League's policy of disarmament. On 4 April 1923, the Irish Free State formally submitted its petition to the League of Nations, requesting membership.

By September, an Irish delegation consisting of government ministers and both legal and foreign policy advisors, had arrived in Geneva seeking to progress the nation's application through a vote at the 4th assembly. This delegation was led by the President of the Executive Council, William T. Cosgrave, Minister for External Affairs, Desmond

FitzGerald, and Minister for Education, Eoin MacNeill. Their trip to Geneva was a tremendous success, with the Irish Free State being formally admitted as a member of the League on 10 September.



The Irish delegation to the League of Nations, September 1923. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. Δ

Ireland on the world stage 1923-1926



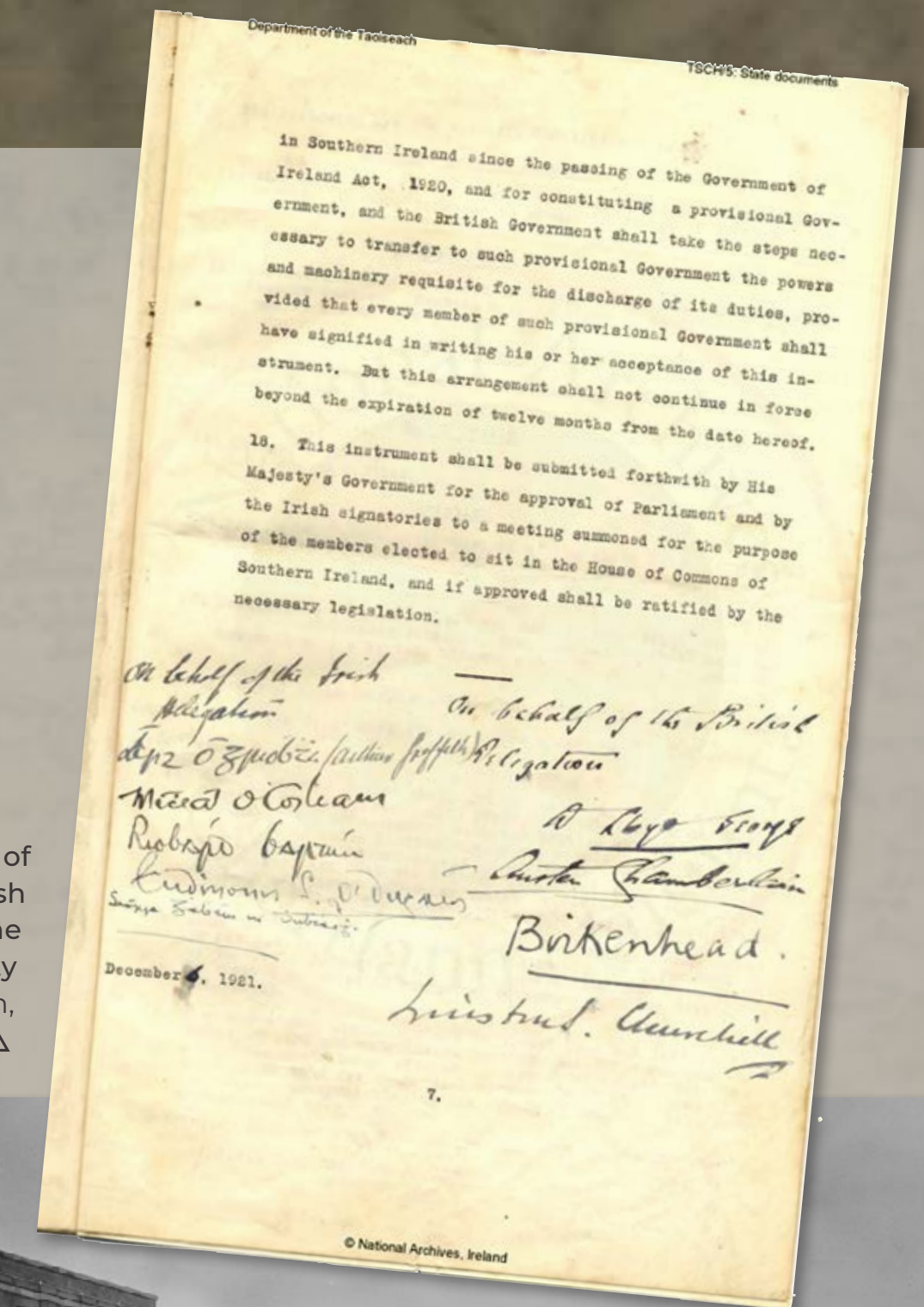
Ireland's first minister for foreign affairs, Desmond FitzGerald
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“It created immediate excitement in the League Secretariat and amongst the members of the Council which is sitting at present. To say it was welcomed would scarcely describe its reception for it was considered as the most important application that has been made since the formulation of the League and more so, even, than if it came from Germany or Russia”. Michael MacWhite describing the atmosphere in Geneva, March 1923, at the prospect of Ireland joining the League of Nations.

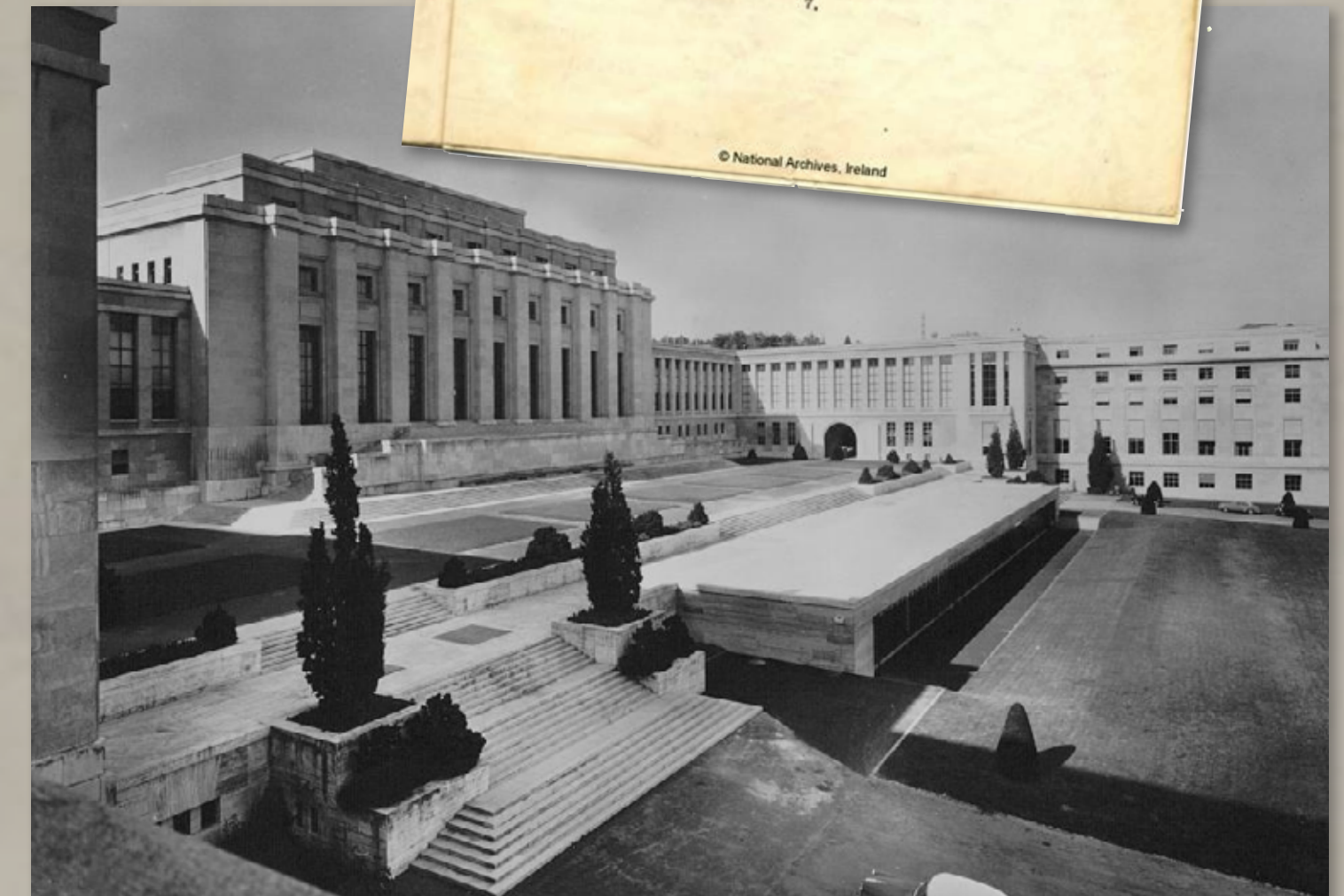
Having succeeded in taking its place among the nations of the world, Ireland now turned its attention

towards actively participating in the work of the League. Its admission had been seen as an international success story, demonstrating Ireland's recovery from the War of Independence and Civil War. In 1923, the Irish government suggested that the Anglo-Irish Treaty be formally registered as an international document. This, it was hoped, would strengthen the position of the new Irish Free State. In the face of protests from British delegates, the treaty was formally registered by the League on 11 July 1924. Re-examination of the work of the boundary commission was also mooted, but no formal decision was taken to deal with the matter.

Between 1923 and 1926, the work of the League of Nations focused mainly on resolving international disputes between nations, which remained as legacies of the Great War. During this period, Ireland participated in debates where relevant, but largely remained an onlooker. In 1926, the Irish Free State put itself forward for membership of the League's Council, which acted as its executive, dealing with the minutiae of international dispute settlement. Although Ireland's bid for council election failed on this occasion, it demonstrated the nation's ambition to promote itself in international politics, and to push the boundaries of its status as a dominion within the British Commonwealth.



The signatures of both British, and Irish negotiators on the Anglo-Irish Treaty
Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. △



League of Nations headquarters at Geneva, Switzerland
© United Nations Archives, Geneva. △

Seán Lester, and Ireland's advancement in international politics 1927-1930

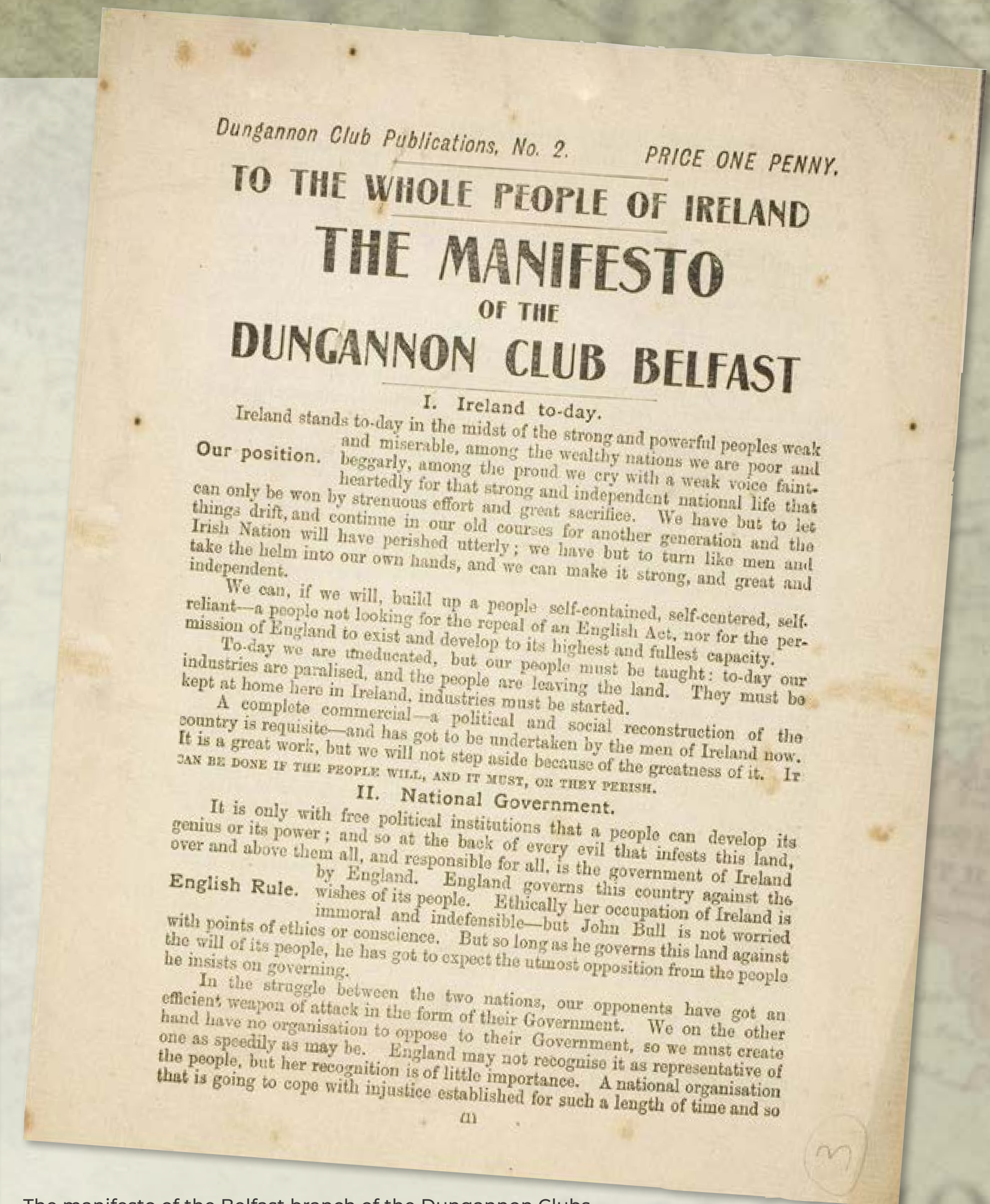
Perhaps the most prominent Irish person associated with the League of Nations was Seán Lester (1888-1959). John Ernest Lester was born in Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim on 27 September 1888. He was raised in a Methodist family, which moved to Belfast when Seán was still a child. Like many other young protestant Irish nationalists at the time, he adopted the Irish version of his name at some point in his late teens. As a young man, Lester spent time in the company of a number of other active Irish nationalists, including Ernest Blythe, Bulmer Hobson, and Denis McCullough. He was also a member of the Gaelic League, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, as well as the Dungannon Clubs, all of which were popular forums for the promotion of Irish independence.

Lester was an accomplished journalist, working first with local newspapers like the North Down Herald, and later in Dublin as news editor with the Freeman's Journal. His expertise and experience in this regard, led to him becoming employed in the Irish Free State's new administration as its director of publicity within the Department of External Affairs. Undoubtedly, his talents in this particular field were of great assistance to the fledgling state, and Lester soon embarked on a

career in the international diplomatic service. From being an Irish nationalist to an Irish internationalist, Seán Lester's path inevitably led to Geneva, where in 1929, he was appointed as Ireland's permanent delegate to the League of Nations, replacing Michael MacWhite. At once, Lester became involved in the Irish Free State's successful campaign to become a member of the League Council, which it secured for a three-year period in September 1930.



Official portrait of Seán Lester
Public domain, Wikimedia Commons. ▷



The manifesto of the Belfast branch of the Dungannon Clubs
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The Danzig Crisis, and Lester's elevation within the League, 1930-1939

The Free State's successful election to the League Council greatly enhanced the prestige and influence of the country within the League. Lester benefited from this development. In the early 1930s, he represented the League in mediating international disputes in Latin America, and was generally regarded as a likeable, hard-working, and equitable representative.

In 1934, proving himself to be an asset not only to Ireland, but also to the League of Nations as a whole, Lester was appointed as High Commissioner of the Free City of Danzig, now Gdańsk, in modern day Poland. The city state, which was approximately the size of County Louth, had been the subject of a heated dispute between Nazi Germany, and the League of Nations, concerning the Polish Corridor and access to the Baltic Sea. Lester's task as High Commissioner was to facilitate mediation between Danzig, and Polish officials. Arbitration with Germany was not part of the brief handed to him by the League.

Throughout his time at Danzig, Lester raised concerns with the League of Nations, over the actions of Nazi Germany, particularly its treatment of Jewish people in the city. For this, he was frequently the subject of

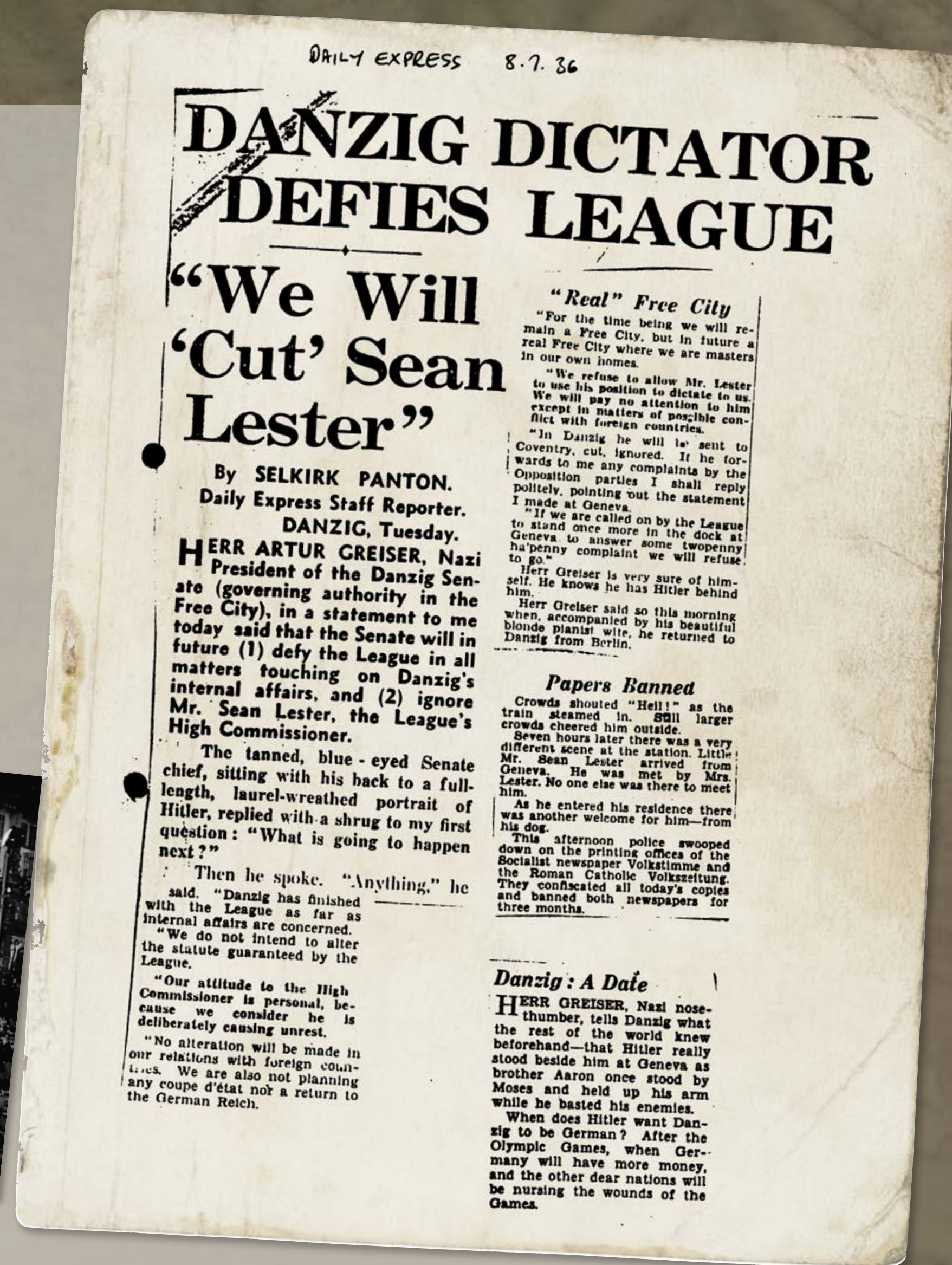
ridicule from Nazi officials, who sought to undermine both his position, and that of the League. By 1936, owing to the strong Nazi presence in the city, and the reality of an imminent coup, Lester concluded that "the League has ceased to count in Danzig". In 1937, as a means to avoid embarrassment in the face of further Nazi antagonism, Lester was recalled to Geneva, where he took up the post of Deputy Secretary General of the League of Nations. Germany eventually annexed Danzig in September 1939, as part of its invasion of Poland.



A Free City of Danzig passport
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Adolf Hitler addresses an audience in Danzig, September 1939
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Wikimedia Commons. [View on Commons](#)



Newspaper coverage from 1936 concerning Lester and protests from Nazi Party officials © United Nations Library and Archives, Geneva [View on Commons](#)

The League strains at the outbreak of the Second World War

Since 1932, the Irish administration had given a good deal of its time and resources to using its voice and seat at the League of Nations. Éamon de Valera, as rotating president of the League's Assembly in both 1932 and 1938, used Ireland's position to criticise the

League's inactivity in the face of threats posed by Germany, Italy and Japan. De Valera stated that the League was beginning to fail in meeting its objectives, and urgent action was required to prevent the further growth of international conflict.

This fear was realised in 1939 when the Second World War broke out, and the League stood by, helpless and irrelevant. By this time, Ireland's chief international diplomat, Seán Lester, had been appointed as only the third ever Secretary General of the League. The institution which he now headed was radically different from the one which had existed at the

beginning of the 1930s. Ireland's policy of neutrality during this time had given Lester the opportunity of acting as an impartial mediator in promoting peace through the medium of the League, but with the outbreak of war it was an impossible task for just one man to undertake.

Having failed in its prime objective of preventing a global conflict, the League was now reduced to simply maintaining its legal status, as well as carrying out some minor humanitarian operations.

Japan's invasion of Manchuria was one of the League's first major failures in preventing conflict
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German Stuka bombers over the Eastern Front during the Second World War
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Japan's invasion of Manchuria was one of the League's first major failures in preventing conflict
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The United Nations, a new international forum

“Let us boldly state that aggression wherever it occurs and however it may be defended, is an international crime, that it is the duty of every peace-loving state to resent it and employ whatever force is necessary to crush it, that the machinery of the Charter, no less than the machinery of the Covenant, is sufficient for this purpose if properly used, and that every well-disposed citizen of every state should be ready to undergo any sacrifice in order to maintain peace...I venture to impress upon my hearers that the great work of peace is resting not only on the narrow interests of our own nations, but even more on those great principles of right and wrong which nations, like individuals, depend.

The League is dead. Long live the United Nations.”
The words of Viscount Robert Cecil at the dissolution of the League of Nations in Geneva, 18 April 1946.

As early as 1941, representatives from the allied nations had begun to discuss the foundation of a new international organisation. The United Nations (UN) would grow out of these discussions; an institution which would go on to replace the work that had been started by the League of Nations. On 19 April 1946, the League was formally dissolved, with much of its assets and commissions being transferred under the remit of

the UN. Having overseen this process, Ireland’s Seán Lester stepped down from his role as the final Secretary General of the world’s first global political forum.

Ireland’s involvement in the UN experienced somewhat of a delayed start. Membership of the League of Nations did not mean that a nation would automatically become a member of the UN. Because Ireland had maintained a policy of neutrality during the Second World War, it was not invited to join, as the allied nations had been. Due to a number of setbacks, including a veto on its membership by the Soviet Union, Ireland only joined the UN in 1955, some ten years after its establishment.

A poster from the Second World War promoting the allies’ United Nations
Public domain, Wikimedia Commons.▷



Seán Lester oversees the handover to the new United Nations
Public domain, UN Library, Geneva. △



The details for the design of the first United Nations flag
Public domain, United Nations Archives. △

The legacy of the League of Nations and Ireland's involvement

The legacy of the League of Nations is something which has been debated by historians and political analysts for decades. Ultimately, the League failed in its main objective to prevent further conflict between nations after the Great War. Although it succeeded in bringing together many of the world's nations in the first international cooperative forum, it failed to work cohesively towards the aims of disarmament, international political dialogue, and peacebuilding. These failures can be contributed to a number of factors including the refusal of the United States to join, and the dominance exercised by Britain and France over much of the League's actions.

These negatives aside, membership of the League of Nations was a hugely positive thing for Ireland, which for the first time, had independently taken its place among the nations of the world. The League provided Ireland with a forum in which to establish itself as an independent state with a separate identity and foreign policy from Britain and the Commonwealth. In turn, this paved the way for Ireland to play an important role both with the United Nations and later the European Union.

In addition, Ireland's success in the League, culminating in the career of Seán Lester, demonstrated the opportunities available to new post-imperial states. This was particularly the case during the period of decolonisation after 1945, when over 100 countries became independent.

A cartoon depicting the failure of the League's members in upholding its mandate
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The League of Nations

Ireland takes her place among the Nations of the World

