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Crisis Management in International Organizations: the League of Nations' response to early challenges

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Abstract

How do international organizations (IOs) respond to existential challenges such as membership withdrawals or budget cuts? Some IOs manage to ignore the challenge or adapt to the demands of the challenging state whereas others build institutional capacities to resist the pressure. Yet, we know little about the internal dynamics that shape IOs' responses to such challenges. This article investigates to what extent IOs' threat perception determines the intensity and direction of their responses to crises. Using the League of Nations' responses to early crises as an explorative historical case study, the analysis shows that a timely and homogenous perception of a crisis leads to a more assertive and substantial response. Two broader conclusions can be drawn from the analysis for IO research. First, the role of international bureaucrats should not be underestimated in shaping an IO's response to crises. Second, the findings indicate that a more nuanced perspective on the League's crisis management can help overcome the failure narrative that dominates the current understanding of the League in International Relations research.

Keywords

League of Nations; crisis management; international organizations; international bureaucracy; threat perception

Disclosure statements

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

1 Introduction

International organizations (IOs) have come under significant pressure in recent years. The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, the withdrawal of the United States government under President Trump from numerous international agreements and the threat of the African Union to have its member states withdraw from the International Criminal Court (ICC) have put these institutions at risk. In addition, the Trump government cut its financial contributions to various United Nations agencies and imposed sanctions on the leadership of the ICC.¹ Such contestation, especially from states that have originally been supportive of IOs, has created significant challenges for the existence of IOs and, potentially, the multilateral order as a whole (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2020; Hooghe et al. 2019; Ikenberry 2018).

How do IOs respond when confronted with such challenges? Recent research has revealed a striking variation in IOs' responses to challenges: IOs with more independent and authoritative bureaucracies seem to display a more conciliatory rhetoric whereas IOs with less constrained bureaucracies defend themselves against attacks by powerful member states more assertively (Heinkelmann-Wild and Jankauskas 2022). Overall, IOs have employed a great variety of "survival tactics" to actively manage such crises (Dijkstra et al. 2022). Their responses vary from ignoring the challenge to adapting to the demands of the contesting state or building institutional capacities in order to resist the pressure (Hirschmann 2021). Existing studies have explained this variation mostly by focusing on institutional factors such as leadership, specific organizational features and the degree of dependence regarding the contesting state to explain the variation in IOs' responses.

While these institutional variables no doubt matter, this article argues that we need to take into consideration the role of threat perception to fully understand IOs' responses to crises. Research on the self-legitimation of IOs argues that "an institution's internal assessment of such critique is decisive" for an IO's response to contestation (Bexell, Jönsson and Stappert 2021). In some instances, the threat perceptions of IO staff have even been used to assess the duration of a legitimacy crisis (Sommerer et al. 2022: 19). Yet, despite these insights, the role of threat perception has mostly been neglected in research on IOs' contestation management thus far.

¹ Council on Foreign Relations. 2023. "Funding the United Nations: How much does the U.S. pay?" March 13, 2023. Accessed September 25, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/article/funding-united-nations-what-impact-do-us-contributions-have-un-agencies-and-programs>; United States Secretary of State. 2020. "Press Statement", September 2, 2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/actions-to-protect-u-s-personnel-from-illegitimate-investigation-by-the-international-criminal-court/index.html>.

To address this lacuna, this article investigates how the threat perception of an IO influences its response to crises. Specifically, I analyze how the extent to which the challenge is construed as an existential threat by the IO's officials determines its response. Drawing on insights from organization theory, the literature on crisis management as well as recent studies on the contestation of international organizations (Boin et al. 2005; Duchek 2020; Heinkelmann-Wild and Jankauskas 2020; Hirschmann 2021), I focus on two dimensions to study an IO's response, namely its intensity and direction. A recent study on UNESCO has shown that contestation in the form of budget cuts only leads to major reforms if the IO's bureaucracy perceives contestation as a threat and if this perception is shared by important member states (Eckhardt et al. 2019). Based on this, I expect a timely and homogenous perception of a crisis to lead to a more assertive and substantial response.

I explore the validity of my argument through a historical case study focusing on the League of Nations' responses to early challenges. Three reasons motivated the selection of this case. First, the League of Nations is particularly insightful for studying threat perception in IO bureaucracies. Existing International Relations research regards the League of Nations as an IO where the bureaucracy had little to know influence. It can therefore serve as a test case for other IOs with seemingly little bureaucratic autonomy as well as later global IOs resulting from the League, such as the World Health Organisation or the International Labour Organisation. Moreover, by studying the League's internal threat perception, this article pays heed to recent historical scholarship that found that the League's Secretariat more influential in shaping the organization than commonly assumed (e.g. Gram-Skjoldager and Ikonomou 2019).

Second, previous studies on IOs' crisis management have exclusively focused on organizations that have "survived" such challenges (Dijkstra et al. 2022; Eckhardt et al. 2019; Heinkelmann-Wild and Jankauskas 2020; Hirschmann 2021; Kreuder-Sonnen 2019). By studying the League of Nations, an organization that is commonly understood as the first failed attempt at large-scale international cooperation (e.g. Grigorescu 2005; Mawar 2021), this article aims at providing a corrective to this selection bias in existing research.

Finally, when it comes to handling existential challenges, timing seems to be a crucial factor in the "lifecycle" of an IO (Gray 2020): especially young organizations are more likely to succumb if confronted with crises (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2021). Yet, only few studies have adopted a longitudinal approach to IO crisis management, arguing that a young IO's response to early challenges influences its ability to deal with later crises (Hirschmann 2021). Studying the early League of Nations therefore not only represents a test case for a young IO's ability to handle

crises, but could also reveal important path dependencies that future research needs to consider when revisiting the organization's later decline.

Two challenges with which the League was confronted during the 1920s are at the center of this analysis: the organization's first budgetary crisis as well as one of its first membership crises, the membership withdrawal of Brazil. These two challenges were perceived very differently regarding the potential threats they were posing for the organization. In the first case, the organization's immediate and homogenous threat perception led to a rather assertive, timely and impactful response. The second case reveals an interesting contrast: while the withdrawal as such was not perceived as existentially threatening throughout the organization and generated no significant response, the League's Secretariat did perceive contagion effects in the region as potentially threatening early on and acted thereupon. Overall, the two cases demonstrate that the League's threat perception is a crucial element to explain differences in the organization's internal dynamics in response to crises.

This article proceeds as follows. I first develop a theoretical framework to integrate threat perception into the study of IO crisis management. I then investigate the role of threat perception in a comparative case study of the League of Nations' responses to two crises, namely its first budgetary crisis and the 1920s membership crisis. The conclusion summarizes the findings and discusses implications for future research, in particular regarding the study of IO crisis management beyond the specific case of the League.

1 IO crisis management: the role of threat perception

To investigate how IOs respond to crises, I conceptualize their responses according to two dimensions identified by the crisis management literature (Boin et al. 2005) and current scholarship on IO responses to contestation (Heinkelmann-Wild and Jankauskas 2022; Hirschmann 2021). First, I assess the intensity of their response, ranging from extensive to minimal or even inactive. Extensive responses include institutional changes that have a long-term impact on the organization's decision-making and policy-making structure. It can also include extensive negotiations or deliberations with the challenging state(s) and coalition-building with other actors inside or outside the IO. Minimal responses include minor policy reforms or little to no engagement with the challenging state(s) or other actors.

Second, I investigate the direction of the response, which can be either self-assertive or conciliatory towards the challenging member state(s) (see Heinkelmann-Wild and Jankauskas 2022). The response can be assertive or conciliatory in rhetoric but also in content: the IO can adopt proposals that aim at isolating the state or at developing a more harmonious relationship with the state. While previous analyses of IO contestation management have revealed further aspects (Dijkstra et al. 2022), I use these two dimensions as ideal-type indicators to assess the impact of threat perception on IO responses to crises.

Organization scholars argue that an organization's culture, in particular its ability to initiate processes proactively and to anticipate crises, plays a significant role in shaping an IO's response (Nelson and Weaver 2015). Moreover, organization researchers have argued already for a long time that recognizing a problem is essential for organizations to develop a coping strategy (Billings et al. 1980). Indeed, the very definition of a crisis is subjective: staff members need to perceive a situation as existentially threatening for it to become a crisis (Boin et al. 2005: 5). Yet, organizations often tend to "take refuge in denial" (Duchek 2020). Key organizational members therefore are crucial as their perception of a threatening situation can convince others of the need to respond (Billings et al. 1980). These insights suggest that the subjective threat perception is crucial for how IOs respond to challenges: the more the challenge is perceived as a threat to the IO's existence, the more impactful and assertive the coping strategy. If the challenge is not perceived as an existential threat, the organization's staff does not recognize the urgency to act. In the latter case, we see a low-key response or even no response at all in reaction to the challenge.

In addition to the crucial step of recognizing a challenge as an existential threat, two factors further influence the intensity and direction of an IO's response. First, a timely recognition of a crisis by the IO seems to be essential. If IOs recognize a crisis immediately, substantial institutional reforms are more likely (Eckhard et al. 2019). Given the dynamic character of crises (e.g. Boin et al. 2020), however, it is important to note that threat perception is not static but can change over time. Thus, even if initially the organization did not perceive a challenge as an existential threat, new information or changes in the organization's leadership can lead to a change in its threat perception. It is therefore important to not only examine the IO's threat perception in the immediate aftermath of a challenge but also investigate if the initial perception has changed over time. On the basis of this, I assume that an IO's response to a challenge is more intense and assertive the more immediately the challenge is perceived as a crisis.

The second factor that shapes an IO's response is the degree to which the threat perception is shared throughout various actors within the institution. For major institutional reforms, it is crucial that the threat perception is shared by the IO's bureaucracy and influential member states (Eckhard et al. 2019). Yet, IO bureaucracies by themselves are complex organizations that "specialize and compartmentalize" (Barnett and Finnemore 1999: 718). Different actors within IO bureaucracies have varying preferences (Ege 2020) that may play into the process of responding to a crisis. I therefore assume that an organization's response to crises is more intense and assertive the more homogenous the threat perception throughout the bureaucracy.

In the following, I investigate the impact of threat perception with regard to the League of Nation's response to challenges. Like any other IO, the League's existence depended not only on financial contributions provided by its member states but also on their active participation (Graham 2017; Patz and Goertz 2019). Given its dependence on sufficient resources and its strive to become the first international organization with universal membership, the organization's existence was significantly challenged, first, when a number of member states did not pay their financial contributions and, second, when Brazil announced – and effected – to withdraw its membership. Of course, these were not the only challenges that the organization faced during its existence. Yet, both are internal challenges that occurred during the early, supposedly rather successful period of the League's existence and can therefore reveal interesting insights into how a rather young organization responds to challenges from its member states.

2 Studying the League's response to early challenges

So far, most writings in IR research on the League focused on its member states, particularly the influence and interests of the great powers. Even those who warn to not underestimate the power of the Secretariat still dedicate most of their work's attention to the League's member states (e.g. Zimmern 1936). Yet, recent works by historians have shown that a more holistic analytical perspective is necessary, one that takes into consideration the agency of the League's bureaucracy, the first significant international administration of this kind (Ikonomou and Gram-Skjoldager 2019; Pedersen 2015). Indeed, a close reading of contemporaneous sources reveals that the Secretariat and its Secretary-General enjoyed a significant room for maneuver (Ranshofen-Wertheimer 1945; Zimmern 1936). Two factors in particular contributed to this: first, the fact that the Secretary-General was "the servant not of one master but of many, and

secondly, that these masters are absentees for the greater part of the year” (Zimmern 1936: 483). Moreover, the League’s Covenant remained rather vague on the secretariat and the high-level officials managed to use – and in some instances even abuse (Zimmern 1936: 486) – this vagueness to expand their influence. Substantive decisions taken by member states in the Assembly and the Council had to be unanimous and thus required extensive a-priori negotiations, often facilitated and guided by secretariat officials who were much more knowledgeable about the issues at hand than the “underprepared and often help-less” member states representatives.²

This indicates that the League’s bureaucracy was able to exert more independent influence than commonly understood. Today’s understanding of a weak and powerless Secretariat stems from this literature’s underlying normative premises. These works were often written by former diplomats who expressed their disappointment over the League’s Secretary-Generals who did not fulfill their formal role with the authority they could have adopted (Ranshofen-Wertheimer 1945). As others – especially historians – have argued, this perspective is primarily based on traditional understandings of classical diplomacy that overlooks the various sub-levels in the League’s bureaucratic institutional structure (Gram-Skjoldager and Ikonomou 2019). This article addresses this lacunae by focusing on the League’s bureaucracy when studying its responses to early challenges. While I do not deny that member states play a crucial role in shaping the League’s response to a crisis, I agree with recent historical scholarship that we also need to seriously consider the organizational dynamics inside of the League. By relying on extensive archival material covering internal staff documents, meeting protocols and letters, I reveal that the League’s Secretariat and individual staff members within certain sections were more influential than the majority of the IR literature has been willing to acknowledge so far.

In the case of the League of Nations, the key actors whose threat perception matters for the analysis of the organization’s response are the high-level permanent officials of the Secretariat, namely the Secretary-General and the directors and heads of the various sections. The member states met only sporadically throughout the year in the Assembly and the Council and usually sent representatives to these meetings who knew little about the League or its specific issues.³ In contrast, the Secretariat’s directors met bi-weekly with the Secretary-General usually always present during these meetings. We know from contemporaneous sources that some emergency

² Pedersen, Susan. 2017. “The League of Nations Secretariat as a Site of Political Imagination.” Rubinstein Lecture, Queen Mary University of London, March 15, 2017. Accessed September 25, 2023: <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8VT391C/download>, p. 24.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

situations required more immediate reactions and the secretariat's officials "endowed with driving power" were ready to take these decisions (Zimmern 1936: 487). Therefore, these closed-door discussions of current matters affecting the League constitute the primary source for this study to examine to what extent a situation was perceived as a crisis by the core League staff. While existing IR research has neglected the influence of individuals when studying decision-making in IOs (for an exception see Ege et al. 2021), this study aims to reveal how the threat perception of high-ranking individuals within the League's Secretariat shaped the organization's overall response to specific challenges.

Of course, the organization's threat perception is not the only factor influencing the League's responses to challenges. Besides member states, institutional variables such as staff size and resources play an important role in shaping an IO's response to crises (Gray 2018; Hirschmann 2021; Debre and Dijkstra 2021). The League was an organization that significantly gained in resources over time. Starting as a small office in London, the League's Secretariat significantly expanded after its move to Geneva, with over 700 staff members from 40 different countries (Gram-Skjoldager and Ikonou 2019: 421).⁴ This expansion was in particular a result of the careful design and staffing policy of the Secretary-General Sir Eric Drummond, who refused to structure the secretariat along the lines of national delegates. Instead, he insisted on structuring the Secretariat according to various issue areas and hired international professionals with an emphasis on their expertise (Pedersen 2015: 46). We can therefore expect the League's responses to crises to change over time, influenced by the organization's resources and capacity (Debre and Dijkstra 2021).

The following empirical analysis relies primarily on archival documents provided by the UN Library & Archives Geneva. This archive has been digitalized recently and provides access to all available League of Nations documents. For the archival search, I combined a keyword search with extensive documentary analysis of meeting protocols (for example, the minutes of the monthly directors' meetings) as well as letters from high-ranking secretariat staff to the Secretary-General. Contemporary accounts as well as secondary literature serve as additional sources for information.

⁴ In comparison with the approximately 45,000 staff members of the United Nations Secretariat, this number of course appears small. However, for a new international organization in its infancy, the very first of its kind, this amount of staff members was quite significant.

3 The League's first budgetary crisis

The League's first significant challenge arose from a budgetary crisis. In 1919 and 1920, the League had to borrow money from banks against interest due to delays in member state contributions.⁵ At one point, the League's Financial Director Herbert Ames noted that there were only 500 GBP left as available capital.⁶ This situation was clearly perceived as an existential threat to the League and the Secretariat's operational activities in particular early on by all high-ranking staff members. Some sections were particularly affected; the funds of the health committee for example were "practically exhausted", as the director reported in a meeting on 28 December 1921.⁷ During the meeting, the directors developed a two-fold strategy to address the low paying morale of members: on the one hand, the Secretariat should engage in constructive dialogue and "appeal" to the countries to pay their dues. They thus chose a more conciliatory response when engaging in direct negotiations with non-paying member states. At the same time, Rajchman, the head of the health section, was asked to brief the Council about the missing payments through a report. It was decided that this report should then be forwarded to the press, clearly a more assertive response strategy that involved public shaming.

The immediate efforts taken by Secretariat staff members seemed to have some effect. Shortly after, in the directors' meeting on 12 April 1922, it was reported that several countries such as Great Britain, Brazil, Japan and Bulgaria paid their contributions "so that sufficient money [was] at hand for 2-3 months".⁸ The suggestion that these countries should be publicly praised however was refuted as the "payment of contributions should not be praised as abnormal".⁹ Nevertheless, the Secretary-General pro-actively suggested to regularly report to the Council about member states' financial contributions and the League's "general financial situation".¹⁰ This suggestion indicates that the Secretary-General perceived the non-payment of their membership dues by states as an existential threat of potentially long-term duration that needed to be addressed institutionally.¹¹ By regularly reporting to the Council, the Secretariat retained

⁵ League of Nations, 13th Session of the Council, Minutes of Meetings from 20 to 23 Jun; doc. R1409/27/13377/2764/Jacket 2, p. 365. Unless noted otherwise, all other primary documents cited below have been published by the League of Nations and are accessible through the new United Nations League of Nations Archive at <https://archives.ungeneva.org/>.

⁶ Doc. R1363/26/8541/8541; p. 213.

⁷ Doc. R1570/40/55026/854/Jacket 1.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Indeed, the League of Nations was confronted with budget shortages throughout its existence and had to defend its expenditures against member states who wanted to keep the mandate of the organization as limited as possible (Patz and Goertz 2019: 66).

the option of publicly naming and shaming non-paying member states at its discretion in the future.

The Secretariat response to these budgetary shortages further included a rather substantive institutional reform proposal. To provide a more sustainable financial situation throughout the Secretariat's budget year, the League's Secretary-General requested the First Assembly to establish a Working Capital Fund to avoid further loans of the bureaucracy's on the private capital market.¹² The Secretary-General further earmarked the balance from the first two budgets as the League's members' first contribution to the Working Capital Fund without prior approval by the Council. In the following, the Council requested the Secretary-General to regularly report on the Working Capital fund, insisting that the WCF should not be used to cover unforeseen expenses.¹³ According to the Financial Regulations adopted by the Third Assembly, the Working Capital Fund was "primarily applicable to meet temporarily normal requirements of regular organisations of the League which cannot be paid out of income at the time when they are due to be met".¹⁴

While the initiative for how to deal with the budgetary shortages came from the Secretariat, the League's Assembly further institutionalized financial supervision through installing a Commission of Control, the so-called Noblemaire Commission, which was mandated to revise the financial regulations. A sub-committee was to keep a list of countries that were in arrears with their contributions.¹⁵ The Commission also investigated the possibility of collecting interest on arrears and fixing a due date for contributions. To economize costs further, the 4th Committee of the Assembly recommended that meetings of all League organizations took place in Geneva in December 1924.¹⁶ Moreover, a list of countries was published who made voluntary contributions to the Working Capital Fund to praise them as role models and encourage further voluntary payments by others.

With the additional voluntary contributions, the League actually carried a surplus in the Working Capital Fund from 1923 into 1924.¹⁷ The overall financial situation steadily improved and was noted by the Assembly: "The sound, healthy and orderly manner in which the finances

¹² Doc. R1369/26/15571/15666/Jacket1, p. 110.

¹³ Doc. R1369/26/15571/15666/Jacket1, p. 61.

¹⁴ Doc. R1415/27/26336/2764/Jacket1.

¹⁵ Presentation by the Secretary-General on the Noblemaire Commission during the meeting of the Fourth Committee of the Third Assembly, Minutes of Meetings from 7-19 September 1922, doc. R1374/26/23313/23163/Jacket1.

¹⁶ Doc. R1599/40/28332/39358.

¹⁷ Fifth Assembly, Minutes of Fourth Committee, September 1924, doc. R1384/26/38491/37358/Jacket 2.

are managed reflects credit upon the entire institution and is a source of legitimate pride to all those who have been responsible for its development”. In the directors’ meeting of 13 January 1926, a good financial situation of the League was reported for 1925 with 19 million in contributions.¹⁸ Until the world-wide recession in the 1930s, the League operated in a stable financial situation with a sufficient operational backup provided by the Working Capital Fund.¹⁹ After the “death” of the League, the Working Capital Fund became part of the United Nations’ financial structure without that much discussion or disagreement.²⁰ The experience of the League seemingly was successful enough to adopt this mechanism for its successor organization. It helped the Secretariat to ensure its operational activities independently of annual budgetary shortages.

In addition to these institutional developments, individual staff members of the Secretariat undertook significant negotiation efforts with specific governments on their payments of contributions and arrears. In particular Julian Nogueira, a high-ranking staff member of the League’s information section and of Latin American origin, went on numerous visits to negotiate special deals for the overdue payments of Latin American countries. During his missions in 1923 and again in 1925-1926, Nogueira negotiated special terms of payment with Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica as well as Argentina and Panama. The communications show that he acted rather independently during these negotiations. This freedom of leverage as well as the length of his trips raised some concern among the directors of the Secretariat.²¹ In addition, Nogueira undertook significant public relations activities for the League, with an effort that came at the expense of even his own meals or sleep.²² In Nicaragua, for example, where public opinion at the time of his visit assumed that the country had already withdrawn from the League as to not pay its financial contributions, he gave numerous public lectures and wrote contributions for newspapers that emphasized the added value of the League for the country and Central America as a whole. His efforts were eventually recognized among the Secretariat’s directors, who acknowledged that the “visit to Nicaragua seems to have been much

¹⁸ Doc. R1571/40/854/55026/Jacket 5.

¹⁹ Doc. R3564/50/25677/722.

²⁰ United Nations General Assembly. n.d. “Committee on contributions”. United Nations. Accessed September 25, 2023. <https://www.un.org/en/ga/contributions/glossary.shtml>.

²¹ When learning about Nogueira’s rather unconventional ways of negotiation, the Secretariat officials noted some concern: “On craint qu’il ait pu commetre une indiscretion”, doc. R1596/40/21451/30885.

²² See Nogueira’s letters to the Secretary-General, doc. R1598/40/26331/30901.

needed” and that “the ignorance at Geneva of the countries of Central America has been, in the past, a regrettable fact”.²³

To sum up, the budgetary crisis was perceived as an existential threat to the organization on all levels rather immediately. This homogenous and quick threat perception led to a substantive, timely and assertive response with the goal of institutionalizing a more sustainable budget. The response to this crisis included members of the Secretariat negotiating with member states in arrears and increasing public communication about the importance of the League in countries unwilling or unable to pay. While naming and shaming – the more assertive approach – were left to the intergovernmental organs of the League, the Secretariat remained conciliatory and undertook great efforts, both at central level and decentralized, to negotiate individual payment agreements with specific countries. Interestingly, these efforts were undertaken by a small number of staff members, in particular the Secretary-General, the Finance Director and his staff, as well as Nogueira from the Information Section who negotiated with specific Latin American countries. There were some disagreements regarding the nature of these negotiations, but overall the efforts remained rather homogeneously conciliatory across the different bureaucratic levels. Due to the overall homogenous and immediate threat perception, the League not only solved a temporary budgetary crisis at a very early stage of its lifecycle but undertook extensive reforms to establish a long-term institutional structure for a financial backup, which was later adopted for its successor organization, the United Nations.²⁴

4 The 1920s membership crisis: a challenge to the League’s strive for universal membership

After the first budgetary crisis discussed above, the 1920s membership crisis became one of the League’s major challenges during its early existence. Already when drafting the Covenant, the participating states expressed their intention that the League was to become an organization with members all across the globe, with invitations extended to states in Europe, Asia, Central and South America (Zimmern 1936: 285). The League’s first Secretary-General, Sir Eric Drummond, fully embraced this idea of universality during his tenure (Macfadyen et al. 2019). Despite the increasing popularity of the League and a growing number of states joining as members throughout the 1920s, however, the organization was confronted with a crisis of

²³ Doc. R1598/40/26331/30901.

²⁴ For further similarities between the League’s and the UN’s budgetary structures, see Patz and Goertz 2019.

membership soon after the start of its existence. In the course of this crisis, which became known as the “Council crisis” (Müller 2020), both Spain and Brazil threatened to withdraw from the League, with Brazil effectively implementing its withdrawal in 1928.

Brazil was represented on the League’s Council since the inception of the organization, however without being granted the official status as permanent member. When the group of Latin American states agreed on a rotation principle to elect Latin American non-permanent members in 1925, securing a permanent Council seat became a priority of Brazil’s foreign policy. Originally the Council consisted of five permanent and four non-permanent members; however, with the US not joining the League, in practice only four permanent members were represented until 1926 (Müller 2020: 310). According to the Covenant, further members could be added by a unanimous decision in the Council and approval of the Assembly (League of Nations 1920: Art. 4). Having been represented at the Council uninterruptedly, Brazil considered itself as a “de facto permanent member” and developed the ambition to acquire formal permanent membership status (Müller 2020: 10).

Brazil’s pursuit of a permanent Council membership culminated in the Special Council session of March 1926, which was scheduled to admit Germany to the League. To achieve its goal of permanent membership Brazil decided to veto Germany’s accession. When it became clear that a permanent seat for Brazil would not find agreement among the other Council members, the Brazilian representative was instructed to announce the country’s intention to immediately withdraw from its non-permanent seat in June 1926, aiming to paralyze any further Council decisions on admitting new members. This withdrawal however proved futile as Germany was nonetheless admitted as a new permanent member in September of 1926, despite Brazil’s absence from the Council.

One would assume that losing Brazil as a member of the League would have been considered a significant blow to the organization’s ambition to include as many relevant states around the globe as possible. Given the strive to universality embraced by the League and its Secretary-General, we would thus expect an immediate dispatch of high-level diplomats to the region to assess the possibility of reversing the Brazilian government’s decision. Of course, questions of membership status were handled by the League’s intergovernmental bodies. Nevertheless, the Secretariat was the only institution to keep regular and direct contact with all the member states outside of the formal intergovernmental meetings. Especially for countries outside of Europe, the regular interactions with the top staff of the Secretariat were crucial to shape their relationship with the League. Within the Secretariat, however, the seriousness of Brazil’s

intentions were gravely underestimated at first. In the Directors' meeting on 13 January 1926, the Secretary-General showed himself very optimistic about the planned special Council meeting in March, which was scheduled to admit Germany as a permanent member, and encouraged the sections to include German contributions into their planning for the annual budget.²⁵ No potential difficulties regarding Brazil were mentioned in any of the protocols of the Directors' meetings.

The relentless position of Brazil during the special Council meeting – in particular “the use of a veto by a state not a great power” – came as a complete surprise to the Secretariat's senior officials.²⁶ Overall, crucial information about the issue of Brazil's veto was lacking inside the Secretariat: according to the Secretary-General, no record of the earlier Council meeting of 1921 – where the Spanish request for permanent membership was put forward by the British and vetoed by Brazil – or of a preceding proposal for permanent membership for Brazil had been kept by the Secretariat. At that point, the high-level officials had no clear strategy for how to deal with the threat of membership withdrawal and showed themselves “puzzled” over the behavior of Brazil, a country that belonged to an “intermediate class of powers that were too small to bully and too great to bend which might on occasion make use of their veto or threaten to withdraw”.²⁷ They agreed, however, that it was important to investigate “the position of the other Southern American states as Brazil had claimed to speak in the interests of South America as a whole whereas the other representatives had done ‘everything they could during the Assembly not to encourage Brazil in her uncompromising attitude’”.²⁸ In none of the director meetings in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal announcement, however, did the Secretary-General or any of the directors suggest a visit to the region by one of their ranks.

The fact that Brazil's withdrawal announcement was not perceived as an existential crisis within the Secretariat was a result of the staff's tendency to distinguish different classes of member states, at least informally. Brazil was considered a “distant country”, whereas other member states, for example Poland, were considered to have more close relations with the League.²⁹ The goal of universal membership therefore was accompanied in reality by an informal

²⁵ Meeting 13 January 1926, doc. R1571/40/854/55026/Jacket 4.

²⁶ Meeting 24 March 1926, doc. R1571/40/854/55026/Jacket 4.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

understanding of different classes of membership.³⁰ Staff members of the League's information section, who undertook an official visit to Latin America in 1921 to "survey the ground with regard to the establishment of a League Bureau in Latin America", had already warned that in Latin America, "the League is seen as something on the far horizon, as a costly institution, not taking great interest in American affairs, and devoid of actual value for Americans. Whatever can be done with advantage towards lessening that distance, justifying or diminishing the cost and proving that the League is a body of world interest and importance will be a necessary step, taken in the right direction".³¹ The withdrawal announcement of Brazil made senior officials within the Secretariat realize that the lack of interest of the League in the "distant" countries could potentially be harmful for the organization in the long run.

Secretary-General Drummond himself was concerned about a potential contagion effect that would make other Latin American member states withdraw as well. To deter others from withdrawing too, he convinced Great Britain as the most powerful country of the necessity to publicly respond to Brazil's withdrawal (Barros 1979: 235). In addition to these diplomatic efforts, the Secretariat established the Committee on Latin American questions in 1927. In their second meeting, the committee members recognized the need to improve relations with Latin American countries and argued that the Secretariat should acquire greater knowledge about Latin America.³² In principle, officials represented in this committee also agreed that Latin American and European countries should be equally represented in the different committees of the League. Yet, they did not pursue this systematically because, as they argued, it would be difficult "to recruit 'first-class men' willing to leave their country for so long".³³ The committee members agreed, however, that public material and communications of the League should also be published in Spanish. To counter the anti-League sentiment in Latin America, they suggested to issue "more propaganda", preferably in a language more suitable to a global (non-Western) audience, "without the 'accent étranger' of usual League pamphlets".³⁴ Moreover, Drummond announced an increase in the Secretariat's budget for Latin American "correspondents", i.e. League officials permanently represented in the region, and to appoint four new correspondents

³⁰ This finding corresponds with the work by historians has emphasized how deeply understandings of empire influenced the League and its reactions to crises (Pedersen 2016). It also reflects the North-South divide about statehood and sovereign equality of former colonies in international institutions not only in the League of Nations (Anghie 2002) but also during the first decades of the United Nations (von Bernstorff and Dann 2019).

³¹ Doc. R1589/40/18583/14672.

³² Minutes of the 2nd meeting of the Committee on Latin-American questions, 7th February 1927, doc. S215/1/4/2.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

in 1928.³⁵ Significant efforts therefore were undertaken to enhance public communication on the advantages of a League membership that reveal a new awareness within the Secretariat that the “more distant” countries mattered as well.

Overall, the Secretary-General recognized that “special circumstances made it necessary to continue to bestow particular care on the Latin American countries”.³⁶ Yet, when it came to concrete implementation, earlier proposals to enhance this “special care” or to even persuade Brazil to remain in the League had found little resonance among the Secretariat’s leadership. In a memorandum of 1926, the head of the League’s Latin America Bureau, Rodriguez, had suggested a “sustained and methodical campaign”, including a visit of the Secretary-General himself to Latin America. He had argued that the League had so far mostly ignored issues affecting its Latin American members.³⁷ The Secretary-General however hesitated to visit the region as such a visit would have required him being absent for several months, which he did not see as feasible around that time both because of the increased workload and potential frictions among staff members (Barros 1979: 229). In the immediate aftermath of Brazil’s withdrawal announcement, the Secretariat displayed mostly a “wait and see” attitude. The matter was not mentioned in any of the directors’ meetings until the meeting of 16 June 1926, during which the Secretary-General said that he had “no information concerning the situation of Brazil apart from what appeared in the press”.³⁸

Only a year later, when time became more pressing – the withdrawal announcement was to become effective after two years –, the Secretariat became more active. In what became a more systematic strategy, members of the Secretariat were encouraged to emphasize the added value of a membership in the League in terms of concrete policy advantages. During a field mission of the heads of the Political Section and the Health to Brazil and Argentina in May 1927, Secretariat officials tried to interest the Brazilian government in the technical aspects of the League’s work, in particular in the domains of health and hygiene.³⁹ This mission was instructed to remain purely technical, “bring back information and to make no noise”.⁴⁰ The Secretariat thus hoped that emphasizing the League’s technical achievements would suffice to avoid any

³⁵ Minutes of the 4th meeting of the Committee on Latin-American questions, 1st April 1927, doc. S215/1/4/2.

³⁶ Minutes of the 6th meeting of the Committee on Latin-American questions, 9th June 1927, doc. S215/1/4/2.

³⁷ Memorandum by Rodriguez on the Panamerican Conference 1926, doc. S487/6/12.

³⁸ Minutes of the meeting of directors, 16th June 1926, doc. R1571/40/854/55026/Jacket 5.

³⁹ Latin American Meeting Paper no. 24, doc. R1606/40/56227/61288.

⁴⁰ Minutes of the 5th meeting of the Committee on Latin-American questions, 6th May 1927, doc. S215/1/4/2.

contagion effect among other Latin American member states.⁴¹ Apart from this, however, the Secretariat was prepared to “let time do its course”.⁴² Despite warnings from a high-level staff member with Latin American background who considered “the present a critical time in the League’s relations with Latin America”, Drummond decided to discontinue the committee’s general meetings on Latin America at the end of 1928.⁴³

In sum, the majority of the high-level officials in the Secretariat did not consider the withdrawal of Brazil as an existential threat to the League’s ambition of universal membership. Staff members at the highest level regarded Brazil and other countries outside of Europe as distant, granting them a less influential status as their European counterparts. This low-level threat perception can explain the minimal and overall rather conciliatory response by the Secretariat’s leadership. Staff on mission in Latin America were instructed to emphasize the advantages of a membership in the League but to otherwise remain very cautious and act “with tact”.⁴⁴ Yet, not all levels within the League remained so indifferent in response to Brazil’s withdrawal announcement. The few high-level officials with Latin American background within the Secretariat, such as Nogueira in the Information Section and Rodriguez in the Latin America Bureau, were clear outliers in their way of assessing the urgency of the need to act.

The Secretariat’s threat perception was much more pronounced, however, regarding the danger of other Latin American member states withdrawing. Here, Brazil’s withdrawal announcement nevertheless served as a wake-up call for the Secretariat to preserve the League’s goal of universal membership. Quite immediately after Brazil’s withdrawal announcement, the Secretariat officials set out to inquire the other Latin American countries’ position on the issue and the Secretary-General himself engaged in diplomatic efforts to have member states publicly shame Brazil. They intensified public communication to increase public support among Latin American countries through writings and regular speeches (“propaganda”) given by high-level staff members travelling to the region. To minimize the risk of a contagion effect, the League’s different levels of staff acted rather homogeneously and were instructed to be assertive in singling out the achievements of the League. Significant resources in terms of personnel, primarily in the information section, and travels were invested by the League’s Secretariat, for example by establishing the Committee on Latin American questions and by increasing the

⁴¹ Drummond himself thought that to avoid contagion effects Brazil should also be excluded from the League’s technical organizations but he didn’t oppose Brazil’s continued membership in public (Barros 1979: 241).

⁴² Latin American Meeting Paper no. 24, doc. R1606/40/56227/61288.

⁴³ Minutes of the Committee on Latin-American questions, 7 December 1928, doc. S215/1/4/2.

⁴⁴ Minutes of the 8th meeting of the Committee on Latin-American questions, 2 September 1927, doc. S215/1/4/2.

number of League “correspondents” in the region. Through public communication and diplomatic engagement with the other Latin American member states, the League developed an assertive and intense response strategy to secure the continued support from the other Latin American member states.

5 Conclusion

This article has analyzed how an IO’s threat perception influences its response to a crisis. Numerous IOs have recently come under pressure; yet, current research has revealed that their responses vary strikingly. While existing studies have explained this variation by looking at institutional or structural variables, this article focused on the role of an IO’s threat perception as an important additional factor that has been neglected by the majority of research. To explore the validity of my argument, I employed a historical case study of the League of Nations’ response to early crises, namely the organization’s first budgetary crisis and the membership withdrawal of Brazil. Drawing on crisis management research and IO contestation literature, I focused on two dimensions to study the League’s response, namely its intensity and direction.

In the first case, the Secretariat immediately recognized the budgetary crisis as a significant threat to the operations and the further existence of the League. The issue was taken very seriously from early on, when the first operational activities by the Secretariat were affected. The responses of the Secretary-General and the treasury department were assertive and substantial, including a strategy for a more sustainable financial basis, which led to the establishment of a Working Capital Fund. The Secretariat took a strong position towards the member states whose contributions were in arrears, either through bilateral negotiations or public communication. In their briefings to the member state bodies, the Secretary-General and the treasurer emphasized the operational achievements of the League and the commitment of individual Secretariat members, especially the hard work of high-level staff members who had not even taken their annual leave. This left no room for member state representatives to question the need for a sustainable financial basis of the League; to the contrary, the institutional reforms and voluntary contributions demonstrate that they supported the efforts of the Secretariat.

The response pattern in the case of the membership crisis is more complex. Regarding the withdrawal of Brazil, the threat perception among high-level staff members was low, except for those staff members with close contact to representatives from Latin American countries. As a consequence, the Secretariat’s response to the withdrawal was low-key. Yet, while the

withdrawal itself was not considered an existential threat, the Secretariat was immediately concerned about a potential contagion effect among other Latin American members. Here, the response was more assertive and substantive, including various institutional innovations, strong public communication and diplomatic engagement highlighting especially the functional benefits of the membership in the League for other countries in the region.

The two cases show that the role of international bureaucrats should not be underestimated in shaping an IO's response to crises. Even if the final decision-making authority on issues such as membership and finance remains with the intergovernmental bodies, secretariats engage in negotiation, procedural assistance and public communication in response to specific crisis situations. In the case of the League, individual staff members undertook significant efforts in negotiating and communicating, sometimes with remarkable independence. Not always did the League's member states share the threat perception of the Secretariat; nevertheless, the efforts of the Secretariat had a significant influence on alerting the member state bodies of the necessity to act both in response to the budgetary crisis and to prevent potential contagion effects from Brazil's membership withdrawal. This is an important insight for our understanding of the internal dynamics of IOs. Earlier studies have found that the threat perception of bureaucracies and member states need to overlap in order for substantial reforms to happen (Eckhard et al. 2019). This article adds to this insight by demonstrating that secretariats can contribute to a more homogenous threat perception throughout an IO.

The findings of this study further resonate with recent work on the League of Nations that has tried to balance the narrative of a failed institution in IR research. Historians have pointed out that important elements of the League have lived on and have greatly shaped international cooperation in specific issue areas until today, such as global health cooperation, humanitarian and refugee assistance and international adjudication (Cottrell 2017; Pedersen 2007). Scholars of Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) and Global International Relations argue that the dominant understanding of the League as a failure also overshadows the successful participation of Latin American states in international cooperation and the long-term impact of the League on the region (Greenman and Tsouvala 2021; McPherson and Wehrli 2015; Schulz 2017). In contrast to the failure narrative that has dominated the post-war reception of the League, the early years of the League were considered as successful by contemporaneous scholarship (d'Aspremont 2020: 276; Pedersen 2007). Until 1931, there was a widespread understanding also among realist scholars that the League of Nations – despite some flaws – constituted the only viable means to entertain international relations in a peaceful

way (Ashworth 2010: 281). In particular, the organization's early successes regarding the Saar, Ruhr, Danzig, Åland Island and Cyprus crises were conducive to a predominantly positive image of the League in the public and in academic audiences at that time, which was characterized as the "period of greatest confidence" (Niemeyer 1952: 552; Steiner 2005: 359). Studying the League's responses to crises during its – rather forgotten – successful period can help overcome the binary understanding of success and failure that currently still dominates the majority of IR scholarship. This article has shed light on the organization's internal dynamics during the earlier, more successful period of its existence. As a next step, future studies could examine the League's threat perception during the later period of its existence, for example when confronted with a wave of withdrawals from Latin American member states during the mid-1930s.

The results of this article bear important implications for the study of IOs in IR research. IOs are by no means passive when confronted with a crisis; to the contrary, internal actors are actively engaging in crisis management. Through gathering support among other member states or stimulating institutional reforms, bureaucratic actors can contribute to the IO's resilience-building activities even when highly dependent and with little autonomy. Yet, an organization's response depends on how the challenge is being perceived by its staff members. Only if a challenge is actually being perceived as existentially threatening can we expect a more assertive and far-ranging response. This opens up a new field of research on IO crisis management that integrates the perception of a crisis by IO staff more systematically. While existing IR research has often neglected the role of individuals inside IOs, the results of this article support recent research on IOs' legitimacy crises (Sommerer et al. 2022) in demonstrating the added value of studying individuals' perceptions. Future studies on IO crisis management should further include both endogenous crises that originate from member states, for example Britain's exit from the European Union, as well as exogenous shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Finally, the case of the League of Nations demonstrates that even an IO that has successfully handled existential challenges at an earlier point in time is not immune against decline. Whether this is due to the nature of the challenge or because institutional responses to specific challenges vary to such an extent that it influences the IO's life prospect remains to be uncovered. Further studies are therefore necessary to investigate what makes IOs successfully thrive during one crisis but succumb at the face of another.

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