



Source: Avenol, n.d., United Nations Archives at Geneva, P052_01_091

AVENOL, Joseph Louis Anne Marie Charles

French international financial expert and second Secretary-General of the League of Nations 1933-1940

By **Bob Reinalda** · Version 21 August 2012

Was born 9 June 1879 in Melle, Deux-Sèvres, France, and passed away 2 September 1952 in Duillier, Vaud, Switzerland. He was the son of Ernest Joseph Marie Avenol, Swiss Guard member and solicitor, and Marie Françoise Renée Dehansy. On 4 September 1901 he married Marie Louise Jeanne Catherine Bernadette Emma (known as Jeanne) Maurel.

On film: www.criticalpast.com/video/65675029407_Economic-Section_League-of-Nations_Avenol-speaks_Alexander-Loveday-speaks

Biography

Avenol's family was of old bourgeois origin. During the early 1800s, his family turned from a liberal toward a more religious, conservative and legitimist mental attitude. In his youth Avenol wanted to become a monk, as his father had served as a papal zouave in Rome until 1870. At the age of eleven he entered a boarding school run by Marianite brothers. At seventeen he began his studies in law at the University of Poitiers. At twenty he continued his law and political science studies at the University of Paris. The moral and political crisis of the Third French Republic resulting from the Dreyfus affair, a political scandal involving anti-Semitism, affected him, but it remains unclear whether or not he supported Alfred Dreyfus. His religious and traditionalist background made him a devoted, but non-practicing, Roman Catholic in the political, rather than the religious, sense. When secretary Vera Blanche Lever (1885-1960), who he had known since 1917, became Avenol's companion and long-time confidante, he did not divorce from his wife, as this would have meant

excommunication. This private situation produced protocol problems in his later diplomatic career in Geneva, where Lever served as hostess at lunches and dinners he gave.

Nearsightedness made it impossible for Avenol to follow a naval career. In 1905 he was appointed to the coveted post of inspector of finances and was promoted to the post of inspector general in 1910. Much to his satisfaction, he served many years in this strictly disciplined branch of the French elite bureaucracy and he moved up in the Ministry of Finance, becoming an international financial expert. From 1916 to 1923 he was a financial delegate to the French Embassy in London. In 1916 Avenol became the French representative in the Inter-Allied Food Council, the Inter-Allied Commission for Reconstruction and (in 1919) the Permanent Committee of the Inter-Allied Supreme Economic Council. After the Versailles peace settlement he became a member of the League of Nations' Economic and Financial Organization. France sent him as financial expert to various places abroad, including the League's international financial and economic conferences in Brussels (1920) and Genoa (1922). In 1921 Avenol was made an honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

In 1922 the French Ministry sent Avenol to Geneva to handle the League's finances. In February 1923 he was named Deputy Secretary-General, replacing Jean Monnet, who resigned in December 1922 to return to Cognac to save his father's firm. Avenol, who had little political experience, became responsible for the League's coordination of post-war financial reconstruction, particularly in Central Europe. In this capacity he devised financial solutions for countries in need, such as Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, and also China, where he was sent on a League mission in 1929. His financial expertise was appreciated. When Secretary-General Eric Drummond decided to resign, an agreement made by London and Paris at Versailles in 1919 ensured that a Frenchman was to be his successor. Avenol's appointment was the subject of debate, but he was unanimously selected to replace Drummond, whose tendency to centralize power was opposed by various member states. The Assembly ratified this decision on 9 December 1932 and Avenol became Secretary-General on 1 July 1933 (for ten years and renewable for three years). He named Drummond's Chef de Cabinet, Frank Walters, Under Secretary-General and Director of the Secretariat's Political Section. Walters served as Avenol's main channel of communications with the British government. Avenol concerned himself less with administration than Drummond, who had reorganized the Secretariat before resigning. The administrative alterations that Avenol did initiate brought the League's Secretariat closer to French bureaucratic procedures (more top down, with a new Central Section for coordination purposes). Passing on to his subordinates all matters that he considered of secondary importance, Avenol concentrated on political and technical affairs. In 1936 the League moved to the magnificent Palace of Nations. Designed in 1929 to house all its organs (Council, Assembly, Permanent Secretariat) it was completed through Avenol's efforts during the politically and financially hard times for the League. The Secretariat had a staff of some 600 people in various Sections: Political; Financial and Economics; Transit; Minorities and Administration (Saar and Danzig); Mandates; Disarmament; Health; Social (Opium and Traffic in Women and Children); Intellectual Cooperation and International Bureaux; Legal; and Information.

Avenol took office four months after Japan had announced its withdrawal from the League, followed by Germany five months later and then Italy four years later. His biographer James Barros stresses Avenol's continual hope for the return of these states, which limited promoting discussion on their aggression. In 1933 Avenol preferred to avoid League political action in Manchuria, which Japan had invaded in 1931. When Italy invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 1935, he attempted to maintain Italian membership by recognizing some of Mussolini's claims. Behind the scenes, he worked against the sanctions the League had imposed on Italy (the first time an international organization used these means). After Emperor Haile Selassie fled his country, Avenol went to see Mussolini in Rome to arrange Abyssinia's expulsion from the League. The expulsion failed, Italy annexed Abyssinia and Avenol proved unable to prevent Italy from renouncing its membership. With regard to refugees from Nazi Germany, Avenol resisted efforts to make the League responsible for intergovernmental action

on their behalf. His reaction to Germany's imposition of annexation on Austria in 1938 was bureaucratic (dropping Austria from the dues list) and Germany's invasion of Poland and the Gestapo's invasion of the home of the League's High Commissioner in Danzig, Carl Burckhardt, in 1939 were not raised in Geneva. Avenol's actions thus diminished the role of the Secretary-General and weakened the organization as a bulwark of collective security. As a result of his disguised political activity, most of these developments remained unknown to the public at large at the time. In response to the Spanish Republican government's call for international help after Franco's offensive against Catalonia in 1938, Avenol accepted the Figueras Agreement of February 1939, which allowed the evacuation of art from the Prado Museum to the Palace of Nations. After a summer exposition in Geneva the works were returned to Franco's Spain, which had announced its withdrawal from the League in May after Franco's victory.

With the League's political influence weakening, Avenol was more successful with an economic and social cooperation initiative. In May 1939, with the support of the US Secretary of State Cordell Hull, the Council set up a committee, chaired by its former President Stanley Bruce, to study reform of the League. In August the committee proposed a coordinating body for all League-related economic and social activities. This was not implemented by the League, but was reflected in the later United Nations Economic and Social Council. When the Soviet Union attacked Finland in 1939, Avenol was the driving force behind the Soviet Union's expulsion from the League and, charged with this responsibility by the Assembly, organized the relief for Finland.

In June 1940 the League was invited to continue its economic and social activities in the US, with the transfer to Princeton, New Jersey taking place in August. This arrangement was set in motion by Arthur Sweetser of the Information Section, with Avenol opposed to the move. When the plan was initiated, Avenol, without telling anyone, dispatched a League courier to France with twenty cases containing his personal effects. When Germany occupied Paris, he told Under Secretary-General Thanassis Aghnides: 'We must work hand in hand with Hitler in order to achieve the unity of Europe and expel England' from Europe (Barros 1969: 219). After the Armistice of 22 June and British attacks on naval units of the French Vichy government in North Africa in early July, Avenol began to fire most of the League's staff, including all British employees, reducing the staff to about one hundred. He contacted Marshall Philippe Pétain to affirm his loyalty to the Vichy government, but ignored the Vichy view that the League should not have a Frenchman as Secretary-General and that Avenol had to resign. Although his initial impulse was to comply, Avenol found it hard to give up his position and his indistinct plan for a 'European' League. On 25 July he announced his resignation but before he accepted this, it needed renewed pressure by the Vichy government through the acting Council President Adolfo Costa du Rels, a visit to Pétain in Vichy on 21 August and internal League frictions during many weeks, including an attempt by Avenol to close down the League for budgetary reasons. On 20 August Avenol named Deputy Secretary-General Seán Lester as Acting Secretary-General since 26 July, which according to Lester misrepresented the facts. After his actual resignation on 31 August 1940, Avenol did not attend the ceremony on 2 September when Lester, who indeed had kept the reduced Secretariat and other League bodies going, was sworn into the office (he held this position in Geneva until 1946). Avenol left Geneva for France and visited Vichy. Later he settled with Lever in the Haute-Savoie village of Marin.

In May 1942 Avenol travelled to Geneva with a memorandum, in which he argued that the future of France lay in close cooperation with Germany. He did not find support for his oversimplified view, which was not even acceptable to the Vichy government, which assumed that Germany would be victorious in the war. Warned in France about an upcoming arrest by the Germans, he and Lever travelled to Switzerland on 31 December 1943, where they were granted political asylum. In 1943 Avenol had written his thoughts about the political situation of Europe from his French perspective. Between March and August 1944 he revised them, adding a few pages on the day Paris was being liberated. In spite of this publication he remained isolated, correctly describing his situation as that of an outcast. After the war he was not particularly cooperative with the UN in clarifying the 1940

events, being more interested in his appeal to the Administrative Tribunal about the consequences of his resignation for his pension. He travelled to Paris a few times and in 1947 had two articles published in *Monde Français*. He remained living in Switzerland, where he died of a heart attack in 1952 at the age of 73.

Unlike Drummond's papers, those of Avenol were not destroyed during the war, but given to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs by the executors of his will (now partly available at the UN Office at Geneva). The assessments of Avenol's tenure are critical. His appointment, according to Stephen Schwebel (1971: 862), had little to do with his capacities but everything with politics: 'Avenol came to power as the League began to lose it'. Whereas Drummond was a 'political' Secretary-General, Avenol struggled to make the League 'non-political', according to Christopher Thorne (1970: 1715), who mentions Avenol's financial expertise and foreshadowing of the UN Economic and Social Council. Arthur Rovine, however, details Avenol's uninspired leadership (unlike that of Albert Thomas of the International Labour Organization), including his lack of sympathy for the ideals of the League Covenant and his *de facto* support of French foreign policy. It may be added that Avenol was not a strong public communicator and lacked the ability to maintain positive relations with staff members, representatives of other international organizations, or visiting parliamentarians. Given their differences of opinion, Avenol refused to see or talk to Lester during the summer of 1940. Through the publication by Barros, Avenol became known as the Secretary-General who drained the League of its political and moral authority. Raymond Fosdick characterizes Avenol as a man of limited vision, incapable of providing the bold and innovative leadership the League, still in its pioneering stage, required.

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