

The Overprinted Issues of Switzerland for the League of Nations and International Labor Organization (1922 - 1946)

NOTE: Text appearing in the yellow-frames comprise the formal exhibit synopsis. Text provided in the green-frames is complimentary material on the subject of League of Nations philately.

PURPOSE:

This is a traditional study of the Swiss issues overprinted for use by the League of Nations (League) and International Labor Organization (Bureau International du Travail - BIT). Included in this study are genuine overprints, specimens, overprint varieties, forged overprints, and both domestic and international service mail during the period of validity of these issues.

IMPORTANCE:

Stamps and postal history of the League provide us with a unique perspective on how an international organization active in the early to mid-20th century functioned and helped shape the history of the world during that time frame. Written communications were vital to the success of the organization and the League and BIT used the Swiss mail system extensively to promote their efforts to improve the post-war world. Most significantly, the League was the first non-territorial entity (i.e. international organization) to have its own postage stamps and fully functional post office.

ORGANIZATION:

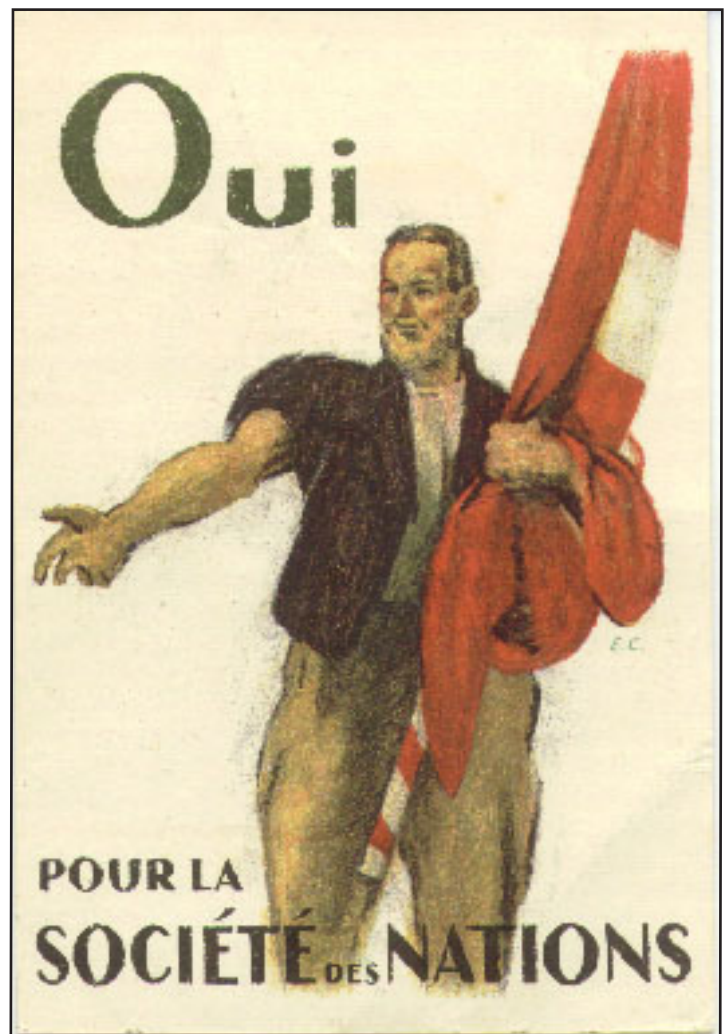
The exhibit is organized in a chronological fashion beginning with forerunner material representing the League's early activities starting in 1920 in Geneva, Switzerland, permanent home of the League. The exhibit transitions to the issuance of the first specially overprinted stamps for the League in 1922 (and BIT in 1923), and examples of contemporaneous domestic and international postal usages of these issues.

Subsequent issues through the final release of 1944 for the League and BIT are treated in the same manner. The exhibit concludes with some very interesting interim period material when the League and United Nations co-existed and shared the same post office and supplies. League stamps were valid for use through mid-1947, and examples of late usages are included in the exhibit.

BACKGROUND:

The League was the first truly international organization created from the ashes of World War I with the hopes of preserving the peace and fostering cooperation among nations for the general good of all mankind. The League was an experiment in political, economic, and technical diplomacy and although generally immortalized as a failure by many historians, the fundamental principles upon which the League was established have survived to this day in the form of the United Nations Organization.

In spite of its obvious failures, the League accomplished a great many humanitarian efforts which forever changed the lives of millions of men, women, and children from all corners of the globe.



Propaganda post card promoting Switzerland accepting the League of Nations within its borders.

CONDITION and RARITY:

This exhibit was assembled from arguably the largest single collection of League service mail in private hands. This collector has spent nearly 50 years acquiring, studying, and documenting League postal history. As an officer in the United Nations Philatelists and member of the American Helvetica Philatelic Society for several decades, I have befriended and corresponded with almost all of the influential philatelists worldwide with interest in the League. The material presented in this exhibit has been extraordinarily difficult to acquire as most of the League's activities were not celebrated through philatelic keepsakes and very few specimens of League service mail may have survived.



Early cover from the first League Assembly 1920 bearing Type II rectangular cancel GENÈVE ASSEMBLEE

HIGHLIGHTS: (Identified with a red border)

Although League and BIT service mail is not very common in general, several notable items in the exhibit have been highlighted using a red border to recognize their exceptional nature. All of these items are currently considered scarce, with fewer than 10 examples known, and in many instances, the only examples known to this author. While there is no official census for League and BIT service mail (Mail from/to the Leticia Commission is the exception and is noted), the quoted numbers are the result of personal research from articles, monographs, auction catalogs, exhibits, and review of specialized collections of these issues for nearly 50 years. Hence the author uses the terms “known” to indicate the numbers of similar items observed, and “recorded” to indicate actual numbers from either documented census on a given subject or recognized in specialized catalogs such as the Zumstein Specialized Catalog of Switzerland.



1.20f.s. Coat of Arms issue 1924 bearing inverted overprint. (1 of 50 recorded).

LEAGUE OF NATIONS POSTAL OPERATIONS:

From its birth at Versailles, the League had a special need for postal operations to ensure timely and efficient transit of official organization correspondence throughout the world.





At the request of the League's first Secretary General, Sir Eric Drummond, the organization administered its own postal operations beginning on November 8, 1920, at a local post office located within the League headquarters at the Hotel National. The League post office operated from 0700 - 1900 hours daily.

Outbound mail was initially collected from the various sections of the League Secretariat, franked with the proper postage at the League post office, and delivered to the adjacent Swiss Genève 1 general post office within the Hotel des Bergues, 3 rue du Mont-Blanc. The postal clerk canceled the stamps and processed the mail pieces. It was during this early period that the special circular date stamp “Genève 1 - Société des Nations,” was placed into service.

On February 3, 1921, processing of the League's correspondence was transferred directly to the League's postal operations within the Hotel National and, after 1936, at the League's permanent headquarters at the Palais des Nations.



Very early cover bearing Genève 1 Société des Nations CDS posted at the Rue du Mont Blanc post office

	Genuine	13.2 x 1.8	3.7 x 1.2	13.1 x 1.8
	Type 1	12.9 x 2.1	3.9 x 1.4	12.7 x 2
	Type 2	12.9 x 2.2	3.6 x 1.1	12.5 x 2.2
	Type 2A	12.7 x 2.0	3.4 x 1.1	12.5 x 1.8

Original research on the overprint forgery classification

PERSONAL RESEARCH



As a specialist collector of the overprinted Swiss issues for the League and BIT for nearly 50 years, I have collected, studied, and written about these issues extensively in the *Journal of the United Nations Philatelists*, the *American Philatelist*, and several other national and international journals and periodicals.

In October 2019 I was invited to Geneva to review and document the permanent museum collection of the United Nations Organization formed initially in 1960 with the purchase of the famed Misteli collection of Swiss International Organizations. During that visit, I was given access to the League Archival records, including the existing documentation dating back to 1920 regarding the proposals for League and BIT service stamps and postal operations. Much of that personal research is embodied in this exhibit.

Additionally, while several noted philatelists have previously written on the subject of League and BIT overprint forgeries [Ganz (1991), Zeigler (1977)], my personal study of this topic has broadened this research significantly through the collection and analysis of dozens of stamps bearing overprint forgeries. The results have been documented in the philatelic press [Galletti (2020)], which provides a novel classification of League overprint forgeries based on explicit characteristics identified from the known forgeries. This continues as a work in progress and currently has expanded to include the known overprint forgeries for the BIT issues.

The “Genève 1” cancel continued to see use through August 14, 1927, when it was permanently replaced by the “Genève 10 Société des Nations” device. The “Genève 10” cancel was used throughout the remaining years of the League until its replacement on January 2, 1947, by the United Nations cancel “Genève 10 Nation Unies.”

Service mail posted outside the normal hours of operation at the League’s post office, and all correspondence of the BIT, was processed at the local Rue du Mont-Blanc post office. Such mail typically bore machine or hand cancels with no reference to their League origins. As such, the only method of identifying these items as correspondence of the League is by observing the special stationery, and after 1922, the service stamps of the organization.

Postal operations at the League headquarters were similar to other Swiss post offices offering services ranging from domestic first class mail, airmail, registration, express, and special handling such as insured mail as well as a compliment of international services.

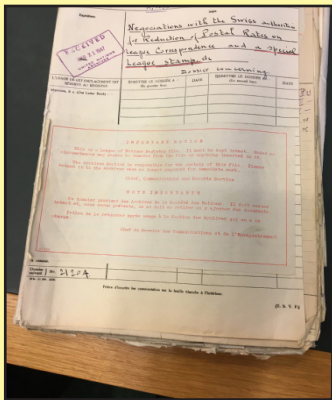
POSTAGE STAMPS USED BY THE LEAGUE AND BIT:

During the short interim period in 1919 when the League of Nations headquarters resided in London, England, no special service stamps were issued by the British Postal Service for use by the organization. Likewise, with few exceptions, no special service stamps were issued for use during League Council meetings or special conferences convened outside Geneva, or by League Commissions or Affiliate Organizations (With the exceptions of the BIT, Geneva, Switzerland, and the Permanent International Court of Justice at the Hague, Netherlands).

Beginning in May 1922, the Swiss PTT provided some of its general purpose stamps in circulation, overprinted “Société des Nations,” for use as official service stamps by the League of Nations. Similarly, starting in March 1923, official service stamps “S.d.N Bureau International du Travail,” for use by the BIT were made available to that organization. Prior to that ordinary non-overprinted Swiss issues were used on service mail of the League of Nations and BIT.

Between 1922 and 1944, the Swiss PTT issued approximately 91 different stamps overprinted for use by the League, and 82 stamps overprinted for use by the BIT. These issues ranged from modest 3c values for use on bulk rate mail to 10fr. issues for use on heavy domestic and international correspondence.





Dossier - League Archive Collection

MAJOR REFERENCES:

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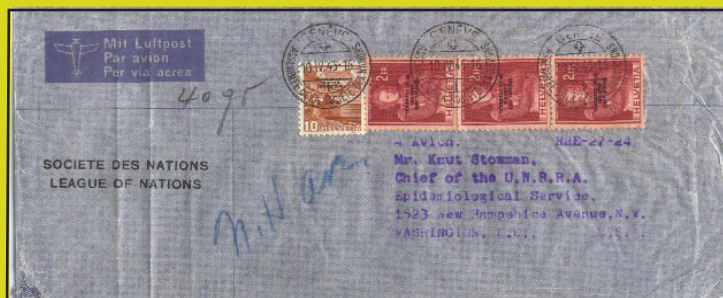
A SPECIAL NOTE ON LEAGUE CANCELS:

On rare occasions, when a standard League canceling device was being serviced, special rectangular auxiliary cancels were used on official Secretariat mail. These auxiliary marks, are commonly referred to as "box cancels," due to their appearance. Two distinct types of box cancels are known bearing the inscriptions "Soc. des Nations," and "Genève S-D-N." The "Soc. des Nations," cancel was used on June 4, 1923, and from May 23 - 27, 1924. The "Genève S-D-N" cancel was used from June 27 - 30, 1927, and again from July 7 - August 13, 1927. One additional temporary cancel, bearing the inscription "Genève Special," was used at the League Secretariat from February 17 - 26, 1936, during the move of the League headquarters into the newly constructed Palais des Nations.

During the League's Assembly, which convened annually each Fall (typically September - October, with the exception of the first Assembly which convened in November 1920), the Swiss PTT made available special canceling devices for use on correspondence from the meetings. For the first meeting, two rectangular cancels have been observed bearing the inscriptions "Genève Assembl." and "Genève Assemblee." The "Genève Assembl." cancel was used from November 15 - 18, 1920. The "Genève Assemblee" cancel was used from November 15 - December 21, 1920.

For the Second Assembly, the rectangular cancel "Genève ASS.S.D.N" was used from September 5 - October 7, 1921. While examples of these three cancels have been rarely observed, almost all have been created to commemorate the meeting. Official service mail bearing these cancels are exceedingly rare.

For the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Assemblies, the Swiss PTT made available the circular cancel "Genève Special" for use on Assembly correspondence, Starting with the 6th Assembly (1925) and for all subsequent Assemblies, including the 20th and final Assembly (1946), the circular cancel "Genève Assemblee de la Société des Nations," was used.



Service cover from the 20th and final League General Assembly bearing special assembly CDS.