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‘A Tragedy of European Concern’ – The conflict between Sean Lester, High Commissioner of the League of Nations and Danzig’s Nazi Senate, 1934-1937²

Among the many and various complex problems which remained at the end of the First World War, the fate of the Baltic port of Danzig was to become one of the most contentious. The main difficulty rested on the fact that while Danzig was predominantly inhabited by Germans, it was being claimed by the Poles as an integral part of any new Polish state as envisaged by the Treaty of Versailles. The city’s position at the mouth of the Vistula as well as its past links to the Polish crown seemed to be strong arguments in favour of incorporating Danzig into Poland. However, those parties directly interested that is, Germany, Poland and Danzig itself, soon discovered that the matter was to be taken out of their hands and instead, decided by the victorious Allied Powers. Therefore, Danzig became not just a local problem concerning only the Germans and the Poles, but was elevated to a major issue in international diplomacy and politics³.

The Free City of Danzig, which formally came into being on November 15, 1920, was a political chimera in that it was an artificial solution with which none of the interested parties was satisfied and was based on the flawed concept

¹ **dr Paul McNamara** – Politechnika Koszalińska.

² This article is largely, but not exclusively based on material in P. McNamara, *Sean Lester, Poland and the Nazi Takeover of Danzig*, Irish Academic Press, Dublin and Portland 2009. Similar themes have also been previously covered in Could this Irishman have stopped Hitler?: *History Ireland*, May/June 2009 (Cover story); P. McNamara, *Sean Lester and Polish Foreign Policy, 1934-1937* [in:] *Polish-Irish Encounters*, S. Egger, J. McDonough (eds.), Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien 2011; (reimagining Ireland Series, Vol. 39); *Sean Lester, Liga Narodów i Polska w Wolnym Mieście Gdańsku, 1934-1937*, [in:] *Polska-Irlandia: Wspólna historia?*, K. Marchlewicz, A. Kucharski (eds.), Poznań 2015; P. McNamara, *The Free City of Danzig’s rejection of its hinterland, as seen through events concerning the League of Nations and Danzig, 1933-1937*, [in:] *Port-Cities and their Hinterlands: Migration, Trade and Cultural Exchange from the early seventeenth-century to 1939*, R. Lee (eds.), London in 2016 (in press).

³ S. Mikos, *Wolne Miasto Gdańsk a Liga Narodów 1920-1939*, Gdańsk 1979, p. 12.

that the mutual economic interests of Poles and Danzigers would lead to an obliteration of national prejudices. From the Polish viewpoint, the creation of a Free City seemed to completely devalue the cession of land from West Prussia, the so-called "Polish Corridor," which gave Poland nominal "Access to the Sea" but no harbour with which to benefit from it. To the Germans, it was part of a dictated peace which was hypocritical in that it casually dispensed with the principle of self-determination, particularly in cases where it might have some benefit for Germany.

The Free City of Danzig was to remain extremely important for both Poland and Germany, although the former was the only country to have official rights in the city. Danzig was to have four powers jockeying with each other for various levels of control over the next two decades: the Danzig Parliament (Volkstag and Senate), the Commission General of the Polish Republic in the Free City of Danzig (KGRP), the High Commissioner for the League of Nations, as well as the Danzig Port and Waterways Commission. Germany, with no formal rights in the Free City, was reduced to playing the role of an *éminence grise*.

The Free City of Danzig, in order to reduce Polish influence, continually strove to be internationally accepted as a sovereign political entity by emphasising its bicameral parliament and democratic constitution. As Danzig's constitution was modelled on those of the Weimar Republic and the German city-state of Lübeck, it politically became a miniature version of Germany. However, it was the Senate which directed government policy, promulgated laws, conducted the administration, drafted the budget and appointed public servants. Consequently, the Senate President sought to behave as a *de facto* head of state although the Free City was not a legally sovereign entity. The political parties representing German-speakers in the Free City, namely the German National People's Party (DNVP), the National Socialist Workers Party (NSDAP or Nazis), the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), the Centre Party and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) were largely local branches of their parent Reich organisations. Although Danzig's foreign relations were supposed to be conducted through the Polish government, Berlin soon developed a close working relationship with the Free City. Danzig's parliament often adopted identical legislation to that passed by the Reichstag with a view to its common goal of reunification with Germany.

The Free City's government, even though it contradicted all economic logic, made the choice to keep its trade as German as possible and not only avoided dealing with Poland, but sought to limit Warsaw's economic activities in Danzig by placing a barrage of restrictions on Polish trade while allowing

Germany to secretly and systematically prop up the Free City's nearly bankrupt economy with annual subventions. At this stage, however, both Danzig and Berlin viewed the League of Nations as the best protection the Free City had against any plans by Poland to expand its authority and not as an obstacle to their common aim of returning Danzig to the Reich.

In 1932, the Danzig NSDAP, having been a tiny fringe party for most of its existence, increased its representation in the new, recently-reduced Danzig Volkstag from 1 seat in 120 (0.8%) to 12 seats in 72 (16.6%)⁴. Indeed, in May of that year the Nazis secured a very slim absolute majority of 50.1% in the Volkstag allowing Dr Herman Rauschning, the 'moderate' face of the local Nazi party to become Senate president while Arthur Greiser's appointment as vice-president kept the militant wing of the Nazi party happy. In November 1934, however, Rauschning was ousted from his position by Arthur Greiser who understood that his role was to implement Hitler's Danzig policy as relayed by the local party leader, or Gauleiter, Albert Forster. The replacement of Rauschning by Greiser signified not only that the Danzig's Nazi's previous conciliatory policy towards Poland and League of Nations had been strangled at birth, but that Danzig's Volkstag, Senate and Constitution would be used as Trojan horse in order to give the Free City all the features of a totalitarian state. Moreover, the Senate would take total precedence over the Volkstag which was soon to be reduced to a mere rubber-stamping talking shop. It was now inevitable that a showdown would take place with Sean Lester, the League's representative in Danzig, guardian of the Free City's Constitution and consequently, protector of the anti-Nazi opposition.

Lester had begun his diplomatic career as Ireland's permanent representative to the League of Nations in 1929, later serving as High Commissioner for the League of Nations in the Free City of Danzig from 1934 to 1937⁵. Here, he had a much earlier insight into aggressive Nazi methods seizing power and eliminating opposition while many European diplomats and politicians were promoting a policy of appeasement. Indeed, it is possible to argue that Lester's conflict with the Nazi Danzig Parliament in 1936 was as important for the authority of the League of Nations as the Abyssinian crisis, which overshadowed it at the time and continues to do so today. At a time when the Nazi governments both in Berlin and Danzig itself were conducting a very aggressive co-ordinated campaign to impose totalitarian rule on the Free City, Lester, in contrast to most of his predecessors, focused on carrying out his two

⁴ M. Andrzejewski, *Ludzie Wolnego Miasta Gdańska (1920-1939)*, Gdańsk 1997, p. 123.

⁵ P. McNamara, 'Lester, Sean', *Encyklopedia Gdańska*, Gdańsk, 2012, p. 570.

main duties, namely to guarantee Danzig's democratic constitution and mediate disputes between the governments of Danzig and Poland.

Moreover, having grown up a Belfast protestant, later becoming an Irish nationalist, Lester was keenly aware how an atmosphere of mutual hate and suspicion between ethnic and religious groups could envelop politically divided small territories. In addition, his experience as League Rapporteur for Minorities in Geneva in the early 1930s when he displayed his abilities as an effective mediator in serious international disputes led to him being offered the Danzig position in late 1933. On taking up the post the following year, Lester informed Irish leader Eamon de Valera that, 'Poles and Germans and Danzigers are united in their belief that an Irishman will understand their respective points of view, and will defend their respective interests'⁶.

Lester's greatest challenge in the Free City was dealing with the consequences of a failed attempt by the NSDAP to take complete control of Danzig's parliament during elections held in 1935. While the Nazis had hoped for a two-thirds majority in order to be legally empowered to change the Danzig constitution into a Nazi charter, the party had, even by using widespread intimidation, violence and fraud, ended up with only 57% of the votes. It was apparent at the outset that, from the Nazi point of view, the elections were to be Danzig's own plebiscite in which the only issue was to be the Free City's return to the Reich. For the opposition on the other hand, it was a merely a question of their fight for survival as a two-thirds Nazi majority would mean the elimination of all non-Nazi political and social groups.

One factor which caused this Nazi failure was Lester's decision to put pressure on the Danzig Senate to conduct free and fair elections, thereby drawing attacks from Greiser⁷. However, instead of strengthening his position, Lester's damning reports to the League Council regarding brazen Nazi electoral and constitutional violations actually sealed Lester's political fate in Danzig. This was because they confronted those European diplomats and politicians who wished to appease Hitler with the very awkward truth of what Nazi rule of parliamentary institutions meant in practice.

Indeed, Lester's report to the League Council in January 1936 spelled out in very frank terms that 1935 had been a year of "considerable difficulty and anxiety." which had seen "an intense development of the policy to create a National Socialist community de facto. The exhortations of the Council at

⁶ 'Sean Lester', Dictionary of Irish Biography, Royal Irish Academy/Cambridge University Press, 2009, (<http://dib.cambridge.org>).

⁷ 'Kurier Warszawski', no. 3/4/1935.

each of its three sessions and my unintermittent efforts have not prevented the application of an anti-constitutional policy in a steadily increasing degree ...”⁸. Lester next dealt with the April elections which were held under conditions “affected by laws subsequently established by the Council to be unconstitutional.” The existence of a large minority opposed to Nazi policies “did not check the efforts to apply to a still greater extent the principles of National Socialism”⁹.

Freedom of the Press had also been severely curtailed and this was in Lester’s view “entirely unsatisfactory”. The Senate “would appear to have been guided more by what is legally possible in a National Socialist State than by what is legally right in a community governed by a Constitution like that of Danzig.” Lester cited only a few examples as “a list of suppressions during the whole year would be proportionately imposing.” Moreover, the Volkstag had been reduced to nothing more than a sham parliament, having met on only seven occasions during the entire year. With each session lasting about an hour, “pitifully inadequate” arrangements were made for the opposition to have an opportunity to speak. Parliamentary restrictions bordering on the ridiculous were introduced in order to further hinder the opposition, while its deputies were arrested on several occasions in violation of their parliamentary immunity. Lester records that at a late 1935 meeting, the opposition was denied the opportunity to ask even one of twenty questions which it had tabled “on the extraordinary ground that they would disturb the tenor of Parliamentary life!”¹⁰.

Lester's public airing of the Danzig Senate's shameless disregard concerning its constitutional obligations was extremely embarrassing for the Free City's authorities and led to a five-month period of co-operation with the High Commissioner. For instance, when, during a lunch with Greiser in late February 1936, Lester mentioned some incidents of violence which had occurred recently, the Senate President “promised me he would see the Police President and the head of the S.A. before leaving Danzig and impress upon them that such things should not recur; that he had an understanding with the High Commissioner and other interested parties and would insist upon the avoidance of any complication of the new policy.”¹¹

⁸ *Annual Report of the High Commissioner for the year 1935, 15/11/1936*, Polish State Archives in Gdansk (Archiwum Państwowe w Gdańsku/APG) 259/157, p. 251.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 251.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 253.

¹¹ Sean Lester Diary, 25/2/1936, A copy of this diary may be consulted at the League of Nations Archive, Geneva.

¹¹ C. Poznański, *The Rights of Nations*, London, 1942, p. 3.

However, due to the fact that Danzig's Volkstag and Senate had almost totally subordinated themselves to Hitler's will, Berlin soon ordered a stop to this conciliatory policy towards Lester. This took the form of a direct assault on the High Commissioner's authority, in revenge for his activities and his damning reports to the League, by ordering the officers of a German cruiser, the *Leipzig*, to openly snub the Irishman during an official courtesy visit to the Free City in June 1936. With both Lester and the League Council outraged at such an insult from Germany, Senate President Greiser was summoned to Geneva to outline Danzig's position. On his way to Geneva, however, Greiser passed through Berlin where he met Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring and Albert Forster and received instructions to launch an extremely aggressive attack on Lester during the League Council meeting on 4 July 1936. When Greiser arrived he was in an excitable state and seemed to some to be half-drunk¹². Later, addressing the Council, he claimed that the *Leipzig* incident had nothing whatsoever to do with Danzig and was a problem between the League and Germany. He then stated that he was in Geneva as the governor of 400,000 Germans "who did not want their destinies to be eternally linked with the League of Nations." Lester, Greiser continued, "did not understand the mentality of the German population" and it was due to the Irishman's attitude that the majority had ended up being "terrorised" by the minority. The Council had two choices, Greiser suggested. Either it could recall Lester and send a replacement or "in view of the imminent reorganisation and reformation of the League of Nations should decide no longer to send a High Commissioner"¹³. Greiser concluded by giving the Hitler salute which drew laughter from the press gallery. In response, he walked over to the reporters and made an offensive gesture which was described by those present as "cocking a snook"¹⁴. Moreover, the Nazi press, both in Danzig and Germany, maintained their co-ordinated campaign against Lester which had been launched following the *Leipzig* incident¹⁵. With Greiser having called the League's bluff, Lester, on his return to Danzig a few days later, felt sufficiently nervous to request Polish military intervention to restore his authority in the Free City¹⁶. Warsaw, although giving the impression it was ready to act, used the crisis to expropriate most of the High Commissioner's powers through a subsequent League Council mandate.

¹² "Gazeta Gdańska", no. 6/7/1936.

¹³ "The League of Nations Official Journal 1936", pp. 762-766.

¹⁴ Greiser had to later leave the League building surrounded by twelve detectives, "Gazeta Gdańska", no. 7/7/1936.

¹⁵ 'Allensteiner Zeitung', no. 7/7/1936.

¹⁶ Lester to Papée, APG, 259/924, p. 497, marked 'Secret'.

The autumn of 1936 left Lester isolated politically and socially in Danzig, with the Senate treating him and his family as *personae non gratae*, and placing his residence under police surveillance. No longer having the power to guarantee the Free City's constitution or the co-operation of the Nazis to act as an arbiter of Danzig-Poland disputes, the announcement of his promotion to Deputy Secretary General of the League that September seemingly allowed both Lester and his bosses in Geneva to save face. However, the news was openly celebrated for weeks afterwards by Greiser and Forster as a Nazi victory in the struggle to rid the Free City of both the League of Nations and, what they termed, Lester's "meddling in internal affairs." It was also obvious to sections of the British press that Lester's "retirement at this juncture will inevitably, if unjustifiably, be interpreted as a retreat by the League. Already rumours are in circulation that Mr. Lester's successor will be, by private agreement between the German and Polish Governments, a Polish national, who may be disinclined to turn a critical eye on Nazi tamperings with the Danzig Constitution so long as no Polish rights are in question."¹⁷ As it turned out, Lester's successor was not a Pole but a German-speaking Swiss historian, Carl Burckhardt, who, finding himself to be in an almost entirely powerless post, subsequently allowed the position to become an instrument of Hitler's appeasers. Thus, the departure of Lester from Danzig heralded the removal of the last real obstacle to the Nazi takeover of the Free City.

Therefore, of the nine League High Commissioners who served during the history of the Free City, Sean Lester stands out as the circumstances with which he had to deal were unique. Although it is true that other High Commissioners had had to deal with the Danzig Nazis while they were either gaining strength or already in power, the League of Nations' relatively strong position from the early 1920s to the mid-1930s meant the Danzig Parliament, Constitution or opposition parties were not under a direct threat as yet. Thus, the High Commissioners' main weapon or being able to summon Danzig's parliament before the League Council in Geneva was still a potent one. However, as the League's credibility began to rapidly wane from 1935 onwards, this weapon became less and less effective, just when Lester needed it most. Indeed, with the Manchurian and Abyssinian crises having exposed the League as a paper tiger by 1936, Sean Lester found that he was still expected to stop a political situation threatening to descend into freefall with hopelessly inadequate tools. As Hans Leonhardt says; "Faced with the impact of a world-revolutionary movement, he had nobody behind him but a secretary and a few typists and servants"¹⁸.

¹⁷ "The Spectator", no. 2/10/1936, pp. 2-3.

¹⁸ H. L. Leonhardt, *The Nazi Conquest of Danzig*, Chicago 1942, p. 221.

Indeed, the fundamental problem was that none of the 'Great Powers of Europe' had considered that the League would ever be in the absurd situation of having to deal with a governing party in Danzig that not only rejected democracy but wished to break away from the League itself. Admittedly, Sean Lester himself did not immediately appreciate the ludicrousness of attempting to convince a party demanding totalitarian government to work within the terms of a democratic constitution, although he soon changed his mind.

Despite Lester's warnings, however, the League Council went along hoping, time after time, that the situation would sort itself out in the end, as its usual policy of non-intervention had always worked in the past. As an increased number of Danzig petitions from the democratic opposition began to come in to Geneva during the second year of Lester's term, this was not seen as evidence that there were fundamental problems which needed to be conclusively solved. In fact, the Council was more anxious to prevent these petitions being brought to its attention in the first place, hoping that the High Commissioner alone would deal with the violations which had given rise to them.

Without doubt, there were many senior figures both on the Council and in various European governments who, supporting appeasement, felt that Lester's conscientious approach towards opposition petitions was threatening to further upset the League's already strained relations with Germany. The clearest example of this is the Council's failure to invalidate and re-run the April 1935 elections. Indeed, with Nazi support having collapsed in Danzig due to a severe financial crisis, a re-run of these elections under the strict supervision of the League that summer could have removed the Nazis from power, thereby removing Hitler's justification for conquering Danzig in September 1939. Indeed, although Poland's role was crucial in these events, Lester did not get the support he needed from Warsaw despite assurances from Polish foreign minister, Col. Józef Beck, that he would have the full backing of the Polish government. However, there were figures within the Polish diplomatic service, especially Kazimierz Papée, the Polish Commissioner General in Danzig, who not only intervened with the Senate on Lester's behalf but viewed Beck's reluctance to support the High Commissioner unequivocally against German interference in Danzig as a serious and fundamental threat to Polish interests¹⁹.

Indeed, there were also those in the League who rejected such a policy of appeasement, having read Lester's detailed reports on the true situation in Danzig. Although Lester did spend his first year in the Free City trying to reach an accommodation with 'moderate' Nazis such as Rauschning, he naturally

¹⁹ Papée to Beck, 29/8/1936, APG, 259/925, p. 136, marked 'Secret'.

sympathised with the democratic opposition. In hindsight, one may suppose Lester took the view, then prevailing in Geneva, that one must be cautious about allowing what seemed to be isolated incidents, into a full-blown crisis leading to war²⁰. Subsequently, Lester's annual report of January 1936 was so unequivocal in its criticisms of the Danzig Nazi government that it exposed appeasement's main premise of attempting to gain Nazi moderation through concessions as entirely mistaken.

Thus, while it is now clear that the political climate was not conducive to a positive outcome by the time Lester had arrived in Danzig, his task was made a futile one by the coming together of several factors well beyond his control. As Lord Cecil observed, Danzig was now "a symptom of war"²¹. It is important to remember, however, that despite Lester being eventually swamped by greater events, he created a window of opportunity to delay the Nazi takeover of Danzig and the destruction of its democratic opposition lasting over a year. Thus, the fact that this was not taken advantage of by Europe's politicians and diplomats is their sin, not Lester's. Indeed, speaking to an Irish audience in London on St. Patrick's Day, 1937, Lester, no doubt bearing his recent experience in Danzig in mind, commented that "When the voice of Ireland has been heard in Europe ... it has been on the side of right and against the policy of might makes right", adding that "it has been seen that we are not only passionately devoted to the idea of freedom for ourselves, but we are a realistic people with a sense of responsibility and a sense of feeling for the difficulties of others"²².

By late summer 1939, the moment to protect Danzig had already long since passed with Sean Lester's tenure as League High Commissioner, a situation which he called 'a tragedy of European concern'²³. Indeed, having guaranteed Poland's security against a German invasion, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain disingenuously claimed that Britain would now be fighting for "principles" rather than "for the future of a far-away city in a foreign land"²⁴. Equally disingenuously, Adolf Hitler, in a letter to French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier just five days before the outbreak of the Second World War, claimed that it was the Poles, not the Germans who had begun: "to raise

²⁰ S. A. Barcroft, *The International Civil Servant: The League of Nations Career of Sean Lester, 1929-1947*, Dublin 1972, pp. 205-208.

²¹ "Leonhardt", p. 241.

²² "The Irish News", no. 18/3/1937.

²³ Sean Lester's Diary, 18/6/1937, and quoted in P. McNamara, *Sean Lester, Poland and the Nazi Takeover of Danzig*, p. 227.

²⁴ C. Poznański, *The Rights of Nations*, London, 1942, p. 3.

demands which one might, perhaps, describe as ridiculous madness, they were not so infinitely dangerous”, adding “I am now profoundly convinced that if, especially by Britain, Poland at that time had been told to be reasonable instead of launching a wild campaign against Germany in the press, and instead putting out rumours of German mobilization, then Europe would be enjoying today, and for 25 years, the condition of deepest peace”²⁵.

Thus, when the Second World War did break out in Danzig, those who had refused to heed Lester’s warnings regarding the Nazi stealth tactics employed to take over the Free City in 1936 had greatly facilitated both the decline of the League of Nations and the rise of Nazi Germany. Moreover, given that Germany did not yet have a military force of full size or strength, if Lester had had much greater support from Britain, France and Poland in 1936, it is possible, or even probable, that Hitler’s ambitions for Danzig and the Polish Corridor would have been delayed or deflected elsewhere. Therefore, by not supporting Sean Lester’s position there, Britain, France and Poland inadvertently provided Hitler with the platform and justification he needed and desired to launch war against Poland three years later.

**“Europejskie Zmartwienie” – konflikt między Seanem Lesterem,
Wysokim Komisarzem Ligi Narodów nazistowskim Senatem Gdańska (1934-1937)**

Streszczenie

Sean Lester, protestant z Belfastu i irlandzki nacjonalista, stał się jednym z pierwszych prawdziwych dyplomatów w Irlandii, kiedy w 1934 r. został mianowany na stanowisko Wysokiego Komisarza w Lidze Narodów Wolnego Miasta Gdańska, bałtyckiego portu, pożądanego przez Polskę i Niemcy. Znalazłszy się w centrum intryg, Lester w bohaterski sposób i za wszelką cenę starał się przeszkodzić zamiarom Partii Nazistowskiej, co do przejęcie całkowitej kontroli nad miastem i przywrócić go do Trzeciej Rzeszy. W połowie 1936 roku, będąc

Bibliografia

Sean Lester, as a Belfast protestant and Irish nationalist, is a particularly interesting figure in both the history of Irish and international diplomacy. In 1934 he became one of Ireland’s first truly international diplomats when he took up the post of High Commissioner of the League of Nations in the Free City of Danzig. As his term coincided with the Danzig NSDAP’s attempts to gain complete control of the city, Lester made strenuous and courageous efforts to frustrate these plans. By mid-1936, having become virtually the only obstacle

²⁵ Hitler to Daladier, 27/8/1939, translated copy from private source.

w istocie jedyną przeszkodą na drodze Nazistów do zdobycia Gdańska, Irlandczyk stał się celem bardzo agresywnej i w końcowej fazie udanej kampanii Hitlera i ruchu nazistowskiego, aby wydalić go z Wolnego Miasta. Ponieważ Polska była jedynym krajem, który miał zagwarantowane oficjalne prawa do Gdańska, stanowisko Polski w związku z tymi wydarzeniami było niezwykle istotne i być może nawet bardziej kluczowe niż rola samej Ligi Narodów.

left in the way of Nazi conquest of Danzig, Lester soon became the focus of a very aggressive and eventually successful Nazi campaign to have him forced out of the Free City. As Poland was the only country with guaranteed official rights in Danzig, Warsaw's position regarding these events was crucial and was, perhaps, even more important than that of the League of Nations itself.

Słowa kluczowe

Keywords

Wolne Miasto Gdańsk, Sean Lester, nazistowskie Niemcy, polityka ustępstw, Polska, Europa międzywojenna, bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe

The Free City of Danzig, Sean Lester, Nazi Germany, Appeasement, Poland, Inter-war Europe, International security.

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