

On the Lotus

Postcards 1898-1931

Edited by Valentin Jeutner

Valentin Jeutner is Professor of International Law at Lund University in Sweden and Senior Retained Lecturer at Pembroke College, Oxford, in the United Kingdom. At Lund University's Faculty of Law, he directs the Museum of International Law.

Meinen Geschwistern

Anemone, Benedikt, Jonathan

Edited by Valentin Jeutner
Cover by Gunilla Albertén & Valentin Jeutner

ISBN 978 91 90023 25 9 (print)
ISBN 978 91 90023 26 6 (electronic)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution
NonCommercial NoDerivs 4.0 International License:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Printed in Sweden by Media Tryck, Lund University, 2026, with
financial support from the Rune and Lena Lavin Foundation for Legal
Research.

Table of Contents



Introduction	1
On the Lotus	29
Postscript for International Lawyers	371
About the Postcards	383
About the Translations	387
Acknowledgements	389



↑ The grand staircase on the *Lotus* (ca. 1913). From the collection of the Museum of International Law.

Introduction

The S.S. *Lotus* has lived three colourful, consequential, and complicated lives. The first two have ended. The third is still unfolding. The postcards brought together in this book follow the vessel through each of those lives and invite you, dear reader, to become part of the third.

In its first incarnation, the *Lotus* was known as the S.S. *Tonkin*. Her construction began in December 1896 at La Ciotat, the small shipbuilding town east of Marseille, where Messageries Maritimes ('La Compagnie'), then France's largest shipping company, maintained one of its principal yards. The company had commissioned the new steamer for its route between Marseille and the French possessions in the Far East.

The *Tonkin*, named after the French protectorate in what is now northern Vietnam, was launched in La Ciotat on 6 March 1898 and departed from Marseille for her maiden voyage on 18 December of the same year. She measured 142 metres in length and 15.5 metres in width, with a displacement of 9,850 tonnes. Her engines produced 9,600 horsepower and carried her at

speeds of up to 19 knots (ca. 35km/h). By comparison, the RMS *Titanic*, launched little more than a decade later, was nearly twice her length and more than five times her tonnage, yet exceeded the *Tonkin's* top speed by only two knots. Though modest beside the great liners that would soon follow, the *Tonkin* belonged to the same modern world of steam and steel.

From 1898 until 1912, the *Tonkin* maintained a regular service between Marseille and Yokohama (see Map 1, pp. 4-5). On her route across the Mediterranean, through the Suez Canal, to the great ports of Asia and the Indian Ocean, the *Tonkin* regularly called at Port Said, Djibouti, Aden, Bombay, Colombo, Singapore, Saigon, Hai Phong, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Kobe.

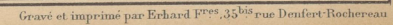
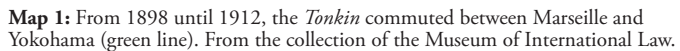
The second life of the *Lotus* began in 1912. Returning to the shipyards of La Ciotat, where she had first been built, the *Tonkin* underwent extensive modifications. Her boilers and funnels were replaced, her passenger accommodations enlarged, and a second promenade deck added above the original superstructure. Emerging from the yard, she was given a new name: S.S. *Lotus*. The change was more than cosmetic. After nearly fifteen years on the long route to the Far East, the ship was assigned to the eastern Mediterranean (see Map 2, pp. 12-13).



↑ The first known photograph of the *Tonkin*, taken in the port of Marseille in April 1899. © Eugène Trutat / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The *Lotus* departed on her first voyage under her new name on 10 January 1913, serving the route to Alexandria, Port Said, Jaffa, Beirut, Tripoli, Smyrna, Thessaloniki, and Constantinople, with departures from Marseille every second Thursday.

If the *Tonkin* had belonged to the vast oceanic world stretching from Europe to East Asia, the *Lotus* entered a different maritime landscape altogether: the crowded and ancient waters of the Levant. The *Lotus* served the ports of the eastern Mediterranean for two decades until, on 29



February 1932, her second and final corporeal life came to an end when she was sold to an Italian company in Genoa for scrapping.

Before the *Lotus* was scrapped, the ship's third life had already begun. It commenced just before midnight on 2 August 1926, in the waters north of Mytilene, the Greek island now known as Lesbos. There, while steaming towards Constantinople, the *Lotus* collided with the much smaller Turkish cargo vessel *Boz-Kourt*. Torn apart by the impact of the collision, the *Boz-Kourt* sank. Eight Turkish sailors lost their lives. The *Lotus* rescued the survivors and carried them onward to Constantinople. Some of the survivors's statements about the collision recorded upon reaching Turkey are included on pp. 277-289.

What followed transformed a maritime accident into the foundational case of modern international law. Upon arrival in Constantinople, Turkish authorities arrested the captain of the *Boz-Kourt*, Hasan Bey, as well as the French officer on watch aboard the *Lotus* at the moment of the collision, Jan Demons. France protested, arguing that the collision had occurred on the high seas and that only France, as the state whose flag the *Lotus* was flying, possessed the right to try the French officer. Turkey disagreed. The dispute was referred to the newly established Permanent Court of



↑ The *Lotus* in the port of Alexandria (1913). From the collection of the Museum of International Law.

International Justice in The Hague, the predecessor of today's International Court of Justice. In its judgment of 7 September 1927, the Court decided in Turkey's favour. It held that because no rule of international law prohibited Turkey from exercising jurisdiction in the case, Turkey was free to do so. From that decision emerged what became known as the *Lotus Principle*: the idea that states are permitted to do anything international law does not prohibit.

The *Lotus Principle* kept the *Lotus* alive long after the ship itself was scrapped in 1932 and introduced me to the ship as a law student in 2009.



↑ Hôtel des Messageries Maritimes, Marseille (ca. 1914). From the collection of the Museum of International Law.

Having encountered the *Lotus Principle* as a student, it took me a few years to discover the rich history of the ship and her passengers. For lawyers, the *Lotus* is usually no more than the trigger for the legal dispute between France and Turkey. In textbooks and classrooms, the circumstances giving rise to the collision may matter but not the story of the *Lotus* herself.

Moreover, as one can read on many of the postcards featured in this book, the *Lotus* was technically a *paquebot* - a packet boat. To me, an uninformed

reader, the term suggested that the principal mission of the *Lotus* was to transport mail and cargo rather than passengers. The *Lotus* did carry mail, but she was, above all, a passenger ship. In addition to 13 officers and a crew of 191, the *Tonkin* could accommodate 348 passengers: 185 in first class, 86 in second, and 77 in third. Reflecting the growing importance of passenger travel, after the *Tonkin's* refurbishment in 1912, the total number of passengers on the *Lotus* increased to 394, divided between 192 in first class, 110 in second, and 92 in third (see the deck plan of the *Lotus* on pp. 102-103).

Across the decades and the three classes, the passengers who travelled aboard the *Lotus* were remarkably diverse: pilgrims and merchants, diplomats and journalists, soldiers and archaeologists, sex workers and migrants, political exiles and tourists, royals and revolutionaries. Some would have arrived in Marseille by train from other parts of Europe on their way home or en route to work overseas. Passengers with time to spare before departure often stayed at the Hôtel des Messageries Maritimes on Place Sadi Carnot, near the docks of Marseille's new port - the same hotel where the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) experimented with and authored his essay about taking hashish in 1928.

The postcards reproduced in this book preserve fragments of journeys across the Mediterranean and beyond. Many messages were written in haste, announcing an imminent arrival in Marseille or unexpected delays (p. 127). They relay, amongst many other things, condolences (p. 67), reports of people embroiled in personal conflicts (p. 117), anxiety over unanswered letters (p. 185), and countless expressions of love and affection (see, e.g., pp. 31, 33, 69, 112, 209, 231, 315).

Like many modern text messages, most were not intended to have a lasting existence. Others were clearly meant to be preserved as souvenirs by their authors or their recipients. The author of the card on p. 313, for example, recorded the dates of their journey aboard the *Lotus* before placing the card in an album. The author of the card on p. 99 mentions the intention to display it at home, and the glue marks still visible on the card itself suggest that they in fact did so.

Some authors expected to reunite with the recipients of their cards very soon: 'next Wednesday' (p. 89) or 'in twenty days' (p. 113). Others assumed they would remain separated for much longer periods of time, in one case for more than two years (p. 31). Certain passengers travelled aboard the *Lotus* so frequently that the ship became part of the routine vocabulary of their lives. On

p. 143, the writer casually refers to the ship simply as 'L.' Others were travelling aboard for the first time and described the *Lotus* with fascination as a 'famous ship' (p. 131), a 'beautiful ship' (p. 165), or a vessel 'as big as a castle' (p. 317). Some attempted to help their recipients imagine life aboard by marking the location of their cabin on the postcard (pp. 55, 169).

Reading these messages today may feel strangely intimate. But it is important to remember that postcards, much like tweets or Facebook posts, were never private documents. They travelled openly through many hands before reaching their destination. What survives in them is what travellers were prepared for others to see and read. The messages were of course addressed to specific recipients, but the group of potential readers was much larger. As the contemporary German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk observed, authors cannot foresee who will read their writings: 'It is one of the rules of the game of literate culture that the senders cannot know in advance who their eventual recipients might be.' The same is true of postcards sent from the decks of the *Lotus*. They connect not only the known authors and addressees but also induct us, today's readers, into the conversations that commenced more than a century ago.



Map 2: From 1913 until 1931, the *Lotus* circulated between Marseille and the eastern Mediterranean (red line). From the collection of the Museum of International Law.

Reading and engaging with the postcards collected in this book is meaningful on its own terms. But the messages also reveal four things in particular: the geographical scope of the ship's routes, the passage of time, the texture of movement, and the varying intensity with which larger historical events entered the lives of ordinary people.

First, the postcards reveal the extraordinary geographical scope of the *Lotus* and of the worlds the ship connected. Written aboard the ship, postcards travelled onward to Denmark (p. 71), Austria (p. 87), Algeria (p. 65), France (p. 69), Greece (p. 349), Hungary (p. 207), Switzerland (p. 319), Syria (p. 183), Wales (p. 363) and even the United States of America (p. 353). The journeys described on the cards stretched from Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux, and Toulon to Port Said, Alexandria, Beirut, Damascus, Constantinople, Haiphong, Saigon, Singapore, Djibouti, Dakar, and Nanning. Other cards mention crossings through the Strait of Messina, views of Corsica and Sicily, eruptions of Stromboli and Vesuvius, storms in the Gulf of Lion, or stops in Malta, Bizerte, Jaffa, Cairo, and Piraeus. The *Lotus* and her passengers were never simply in one place, but always connected to persons in cities, towns, and countries far beyond the horizon visible from the ship itself.



↑ Passengers on the *Lotus* in Marseille (ca. 1913). From the collection of the Museum of International Law.

Second, by inviting us into the geopolitical world of the early twentieth century, the postcards help us get a sense of the passage of time. Between the *Tonkin's* maiden voyage in 1898 and the scrapping of the *Lotus* in 1932, the political landscape through which the ship travelled changed dramatically. The Ottoman, Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian Empires collapsed. The Qing dynasty fell in China. New states emerged across Europe while colonial rule expanded in Africa and the Middle East. The First World War redrew borders across the Mediterranean and beyond, and the League of Nations attempted to construct a new international order from the ruins

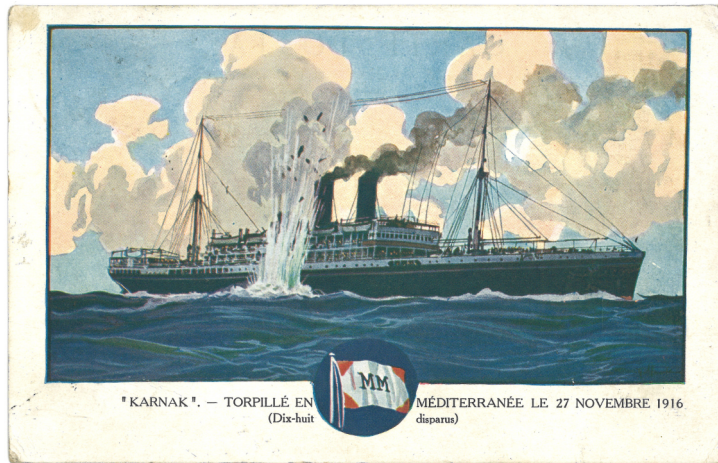
of the old. Today, Constantinople is Istanbul; Saigon is Ho Chi Minh City; Haiphong and Cochinchina are integral parts of independent Vietnam; Jaffa, once Mandatory Palestine's largest and most important port, is now a part of the Israeli city of Tel Aviv. In the postcards, Damascus and Beirut appear as cities administered by France; today, they are the capitals of Syria and Lebanon. Constantine and Bizerte likewise formed part of the French colonial empire in North Africa and are now cities in Algeria and Tunisia.

The geopolitical transformations over the last century have been so profound that the journey of the *Lotus* around the Mediterranean could no longer be undertaken today. While the eastern Mediterranean could be traversed with comparative ease in the 1920s, it is now a fractured landscape of fortified borders, contested territories and conflict. In this sense, the postcards do not merely record movement through space. They also record movement through time. They preserve traces of political orders, colonial structures, empires, borders, and cities that have long since changed their names or disappeared.

Third, the cards preserve the texture of movement itself. They record the experience of travelling slowly through the maritime world of the early twentieth century, of watching coastlines emerge

at dawn, of waiting for reunions, of crossing borders, of leaving home, or attempting to return to it. One postcard captures the texture of movement quite literally: the writer apologises for the near illegibility of the handwriting because the ship is rolling heavily at sea. The writer's scratchy lines on the card make visible the physical movement of the *Lotus* herself (p. 267).

Finally, the postcards reveal what the biographies of statesmen and other leaders rarely disclose: the uneven intensity with which historical developments affect the lives of ordinary people. As Sebastian Haffner (1907-1999), a German journalist and writer, observed, some historical events pass over lives 'like a cloud over a lake,' leaving only a fleeting shadow, while others 'whip up the lake as in a thunderstorm,' altering it completely. The postcards reproduced here capture those differences in intensity unusually well. Some barely register the major political events of the age. Others reveal lives disrupted by war, migration, separation, or political upheaval. Several cards were written by soldiers during the First World War (p. 269). One card even depicts the cannon mounted on the *Lotus* during the war (p. 137) and refers explicitly to the danger of being torpedoed. The danger was real. In late 1916, a German submarine sunk the *Karnak*, a sister ship of the *Lotus*. In 1917, while sailing under Japanese



↑ The *Karnak*, a sister ship of the *Lotus*, was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine on 27 November 1916. From the collection of the Museum of International Law.

destroyer escort south of Sardinia, the *Lotus* herself narrowly escaped a German attack when rescuing survivors from the torpedoed liner *Mooltan*. A few months later, another torpedo narrowly missed the *Lotus* north of Benghazi. Postcards written by soldiers after the war reflect France's occupation of large parts of the Levant (p. 199), while the card on p. 273 hints at strained post-war relations between France and Turkey by describing a Turkish police raid aboard the *Lotus* in April 1926.

Taken together, the postcards preserve fragments of how ordinary individuals experienced the transformations of the early twentieth century while moving through the world aboard the *Lotus*.

Although the postcards help us gain an understanding of the lives of comparatively ordinary *Lotus* passengers, they provide only faint glimpses into the lives of two other groups aboard the ship: those whose privilege ensured that their journeys entered the public record, and those who were extraordinarily underprivileged and left behind few written traces. Only occasionally do we find subtle hints on the postcards to the presence of both groups aboard the ship.

With respect to the group of the privileged, the authors of the postcard on p. 127, for example, inform their relatives that they continue their holidays in Port Said 'at the princess' expense,' hinting at worlds of first-class travel and elite patronage that otherwise remain largely invisible in the postcards. Among these privileged passengers were several figures who shaped politics, philosophy, and art beyond the world of the *Lotus*.

Two particularly consequential encounters on the *Lotus* took place in 1905 and 1924. The first contributed to the Chinese Revolution. The second influenced the *Star Wars* saga.

In the summer of 1905, Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), the revolutionary who would become the founding father of modern China, travelled on the *Tonkin* from Marseille to Yokohama. On board

the ship, he met the businessman Zhang Renjie (1877-1950), who became one of Sun's closest political allies. Zhang's financial support helped Sun to fund the activities that eventually contributed to the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912.

Almost two decades later, in 1924, the *Lotus* became the site of a second consequential encounter: the Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) met the American scholar Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) aboard the ship. Campbell would later become one of the twentieth century's most influential writers on mythology and religion. His book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* introduced the concept of the 'monomyth,' or the hero's journey - a narrative pattern found in myths across cultures. This idea had a profound impact on modern storytelling, particularly in film. George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*, cited Campbell's work as a major inspiration for the structure and themes of the saga. As a result, Campbell gained widespread recognition beyond academic circles and became a significant figure in popular culture. Campbell himself attributed his fascination with Asian philosophy and comparative mythology to his encounter with Krishnamurti aboard the *Lotus*.

While no trace of either encounter survives in the postcards, they do preserve glimpses of one of the first notable passengers aboard the *Tonkin*: the poet Paul-Jean Toulet (1867-1920). Toulet's works include poems, novels, and diaries composed largely of literary observations, gossip, and travel impressions. Toulet is known for inventing an ABBA verse form later used in his *Contrerimes* (1921). He also developed the curious habit of sending postcards and letters to himself from the ports he visited. Excerpts of a letter by Toulet to himself are reproduced in this volume (pp. 43-45).

In February 1912, shortly before the *Tonkin* became the *Lotus*, Prince Wilhelm of Sweden, Duke of Södermanland (1884-1965), and his wife, Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna of Russia (1890-1958), travelled from Saigon to Singapore aboard the ship. None of Maria Pavlovna's numerous memoirs and travel diaries mention the *Tonkin*. But Prince Wilhelm's description of the couple's departure from Saigon aboard the ship is reproduced in this book (pp. 93-95).

In 1920, French president Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929), who led France during the final years of the First World War, crossed the Mediterranean aboard the *Lotus* shortly after leaving office. No written account of Clemenceau's voyage aboard the ship survives. But since Clemenceau's

departure occasioned the presence of the press, the journey resulted in the only two known film recordings of the *Lotus*. Links to these recordings can be found on pp. 158-159.

Also included in this book is a vivid account of the journey of another head of state aboard the *Lotus*: Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878-1944). Reza Shah Pahlavi, Shah and Prime Minister of Iran, travelled aboard the ship from Beirut to Marseille in December 1923. No film recording or photos of the Shah's time aboard the ship appear to exist but one passenger's detailed description of the Shah's journey aboard the *Lotus* is reproduced on pages pp. 225-229.

The most prolific writer belonging to the privileged category of passengers was the Dutch-Canadian journalist Pierre van Paassen (1895-1968), who claimed to have travelled aboard the *Lotus* numerous times during the 1920s. He left detailed accounts of his journeys aboard the ship and even suggested that the *Lotus* might have remained in operation long after it was supposedly scrapped in 1932. Since van Paassen was later revealed to have plagiarised and invented many of his stories, his claims provide only fragile grounds for believing that the *Lotus* might still be around. An excerpt of one of van Paassen's alleged journeys aboard the *Lotus* is included in this book (pp. 294-311).

During the second half of the 1920s in particular, the *Lotus* carried archaeologists from America and Europe to excavation sites in the Middle East. Among them was the American priest and archeologist Léon Legrain (1865-1939), who travelled aboard the *Lotus* in October 1924. Legrain was later renowned for his work at Ur in present-day Iraq. Excerpts from his account of departing Marseille are reproduced on pp. 253-257. In 1931, the British archaeologist Olga Tufnell (1905-1985) travelled on the *Lotus*. Tufnell is well-known for her excavations at Lachish in present-day Israel and for her interest in Palestinian cultural life. A letter she wrote aboard the ship to her parents in 1931 is reproduced on pp. 358-361. On one of the ship's very last voyages, Nina and Wassily Kandinsky travelled aboard the *Lotus* to Egypt. No written account survives, but more than 70 photographs document the journey. You can find some of them by scanning the QR code on p. 24.

The unusually rich written traces left behind by such privileged passengers stand in sharp contrast to the fragmentary glimpses we possess of a second group of people aboard the ship who appear, if at all, only indirectly or in passing in the postcard messages written by passengers. The author of the postcard on p. 205, for example, refers to a strike that disrupted travel and alerts attentive readers



↑ In 1931, the painter and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) travelled aboard the *Lotus* with his wife, Nina (1899-1980), to Egypt. They are pictured here on the *Lotus* in the port of Naples on 3 September 1931. © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Fonds.

Some of the more than 70 photographs which document the trip can be accessed online by scanning the QR code.

to the presence of workers in the engine rooms labouring under precarious and often unsafe conditions. Indeed, the lives of the postcard writers depended upon a vast and largely invisible workforce that kept the ship in motion. On the eve of the First World War, nearly half of the employees of Messageries Maritimes, the company operating the *Lotus*, were French colonial subjects and other non-European workers, often recruited in ports such as Aden, Colombo, Hong Kong, Singapore, Saigon, and Haiphong: Somali coal heavers, Chinese engine room workers, Indian stokers, Indochinese deckhands and service workers. Underpaid, racially segregated, and frequently relegated to the literal cargo hold of empire (cf. p. 251), these workers were the human machinery that sustained steamship travel.

Their experiences and stories rarely appear in official histories except during moments of disruption. In 1899, for example, Somali engine room workers aboard the *Tonkin* mutinied near Port Said after learning that their crew foreman would be dismissed in Djibouti. In 1910, Chinese and Indochinese crew members staged a walkout in Singapore after officers attempted to confiscate the songbirds they kept and traded aboard the ship. In June 1917, two Chinese workers, referred to only by their employee numbers (No. 11985 and No. 11088), reportedly fell or jumped overboard

three days apart. Whether or not they jumped and died voluntarily, the captain was unable or unwilling to determine.

It might be tempting to think of the *Lotus* as a self-contained, floating microcosm, but in reality, the polished decks of this imperial passenger liner reflected and embodied the same hierarchies and tensions found on *terra firma*. The few textual references to the plight of members of the workforce aboard the *Lotus* can be found in the voyage reports and logbooks that I am currently preparing for publication. If we wish to truly understand the world reflected in these postcards, we must keep in mind not only those who wrote them, but also those who kept afloat the boat on which the postcard authors travelled.

Another group of people, largely - though not entirely - absent from the postcard messages are sex workers in certain Mediterranean ports and onboard the *Lotus* herself. The postcard on p. 41 refers to Marseille's red light district, for example, and the postcard on p. 231 can be read as containing a reference to the presence of sex workers on the *Lotus* herself. By the 1920s, Mediterranean steamship routes had become entangled with efforts to police prostitution and trafficking across borders. Officers of the International Bureau for the Suppression of the

Traffic in Women and Children complained to Messageries Maritimes, the French authorities on the mainland, and to the League of Nations, that traffickers and sex workers repeatedly boarded the *Lotus* with the complicity of crew members. Excerpts of the report of the International Bureau about the *Lotus* and of statements provided by French women trafficked on the ship can be found on pp. 247-249, 325-327. To follow the traces of the *Lotus* means looking beyond the postcard messages themselves, toward the wider human and political worlds through which the ship moved.

Today, the ship itself no longer exists. Nearly a century ago, her steel was broken apart in Genoa. Yet her name continues to travel through lecture halls, courtrooms, textbooks, and debates about the limits of state power and the nature of international law itself. Alongside that legal afterlife survives another one: a human archive preserved in paper, ink, memory, and image. That is why the third life of the *Lotus* never truly ended. This book, and the postcards collected within it, and you, dear reader, are now part of that continuing voyage.



↑ The *Lotus* at sea (ca. 1922). From the collection of the Museum of International Law.

On the Lotus

Postcards & Letters