The Geneva Dream: The League of Nations and Post-War Internationalism

I

The League of Nations was, in the words of its most tireless champion, Lord Robert Cecil, ‘a great experiment’.1 President Wilson’s creation injected a new multinational dimension into the traditional modes of diplomatic negotiation. Apart from those who embraced the Marxist-Leninist approach to diplomacy, the system of international relations embodied by the League appeared to many to offer the most viable alternative to the balance-of-power mechanism that had failed so disastrously in 1914. It was not, of course, the League that Wilson had envisaged, quite apart from the absence of the United States itself. The ‘Geneva system’ was not a substitute for great-power politics, as he had intended, but rather an adjunct to it. It was only a mechanism for conducting multinational diplomacy whose success or failure depended on the willingness of the states, and particularly the most powerful states, to use it. The growth of the new institution was fostered by the increasing internationalization of so many questions previously considered solely of national concern, but it always operated within prescribed limits. The sovereign state was the only source of the League’s power. There could be no authority above that of the state, and no state could be legally bound without its own consent. The League of Nations was never intended to be a superstate. It was an experiment in internationalism at a time when the counterclaims of nationalism were running powerfully in the opposite direction.

The League of Nations was inextricably intertwined with the peace settlement. Its ‘Covenant’ was enshrined within the Treaty of Versailles as its first twenty-six articles. This posed special difficulties from the start. There was a basic contradiction between the treaty that ended the war and a Covenant that proposed a new form of international security.

1 Viscount Cecil, A Great Experiment (London, 1941).
The Versailles treaty served the interests of the triumphant Allies and confirmed the new European equilibrium; the League was to serve the interests of all, with the security of each dependent on the security of all. The League had been created by the victor powers and the defeated were excluded from immediate membership. The new body was given specific duties associated with the peace treaty with regard to the Saar, Danzig, and Upper Silesia. Yet to work properly the new system of security needed to be universal and the League’s orientation global. From the start, despite the American input to its creation and its many non-European members, the League was a Eurocentric institution, and this European bias was intensified when the American Senate rejected the Versailles treaty in March 1920. Yet neither the British nor the French, who had little confidence in the structure, saw the League as providing the answer either to the stabilization of Europe or to the future security of France. The League was marginal to Lloyd George’s way of thinking. He much preferred the meetings of political heads of state, where he and his French counterpart could settle their differences in private. Popular opinion and political considerations rather than enthusiasm or confidence dictated a public policy of qualified support. Privately, Lloyd George believed that a League without the United States was a worthless if not a dangerous institution. While Britain remained an active member and the League’s chief financial supporter, Lloyd George made certain that it dealt with questions of relatively little importance. The French leadership, too—and there was little difference between the openly sceptical Clemenceau and his successors—nurtured the League only insofar as it could be turned into the instrument that had been rejected at the peace conference. With great speed, after the Anglo-American guarantee lapsed, the French negotiated bilateral arrangements with Poland and Czechoslovakia to buttress their security position. They also began the search for an alliance with Britain that became a recurring theme in Anglo-French relations. In parallel actions, the French took the initiative at Geneva to strengthen the League’s collective enforcement role which the Covenant only imperfectly institutionalized. It was one way to secure British underwriting of France’s security needs.

The League was created, first and foremost, to be a security organization. The core of the Covenant lay in those clauses outlining the new security system: the obligations of members, the rules for the settlement of disputes, and the sanctions to be applied to transgressors. It was here that the clash between the hopes of the drafters and the realities of the international system were most apparent and that the weaknesses of the new system most clearly revealed. Article 10, so important to Wilson, guaranteed the territorial integrity and political independence
of member states, yet it stopped short of its logical conclusions. Members were not bound to take any specific actions and the Council could only ‘advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be fulfilled’. This article appeared dangerous because it added an unnecessary element of inflexibility to the system. Given the way the new territorial lines were drawn and the still undetermined future of so many national boundaries, any guarantee of the status quo was more likely to provoke conflict than to assure peace. It highlighted the division between the states (France, Poland, and the Little Entente powers) which had everything to gain from the existing situation and those (Britain, Italy, and Japan) which were anxious or at least prepared to consider future revision. It was one of the reasons for the US Senate’s rejection of the entire treaty and was much disliked by the British. Article 19, framed by Cecil to provide greater flexibility for revision, was invoked only once, in 1920. It proved a cumbersome and inappropriate method for dealing with change in the inter-war years, a period of unusual fluidity in the international system. It was Article 11, which declared any war or threat of war to be a matter of concern for the entire League and reflected the more limited British view of what an international body could achieve, that turned out to be the most commonly used method of bringing disputes to the League’s attention. In this respect the new body acted as a commission of conciliation. For war was neither outlawed nor excluded by the Covenant. While states had to accept arbitration or ask for Council intervention in disputes, through Articles 12 to 15, if this failed they were free to ‘resort to war’ after a three-month delay. Little use was made in the 1920s of the articles that set in motion the automatic and immediate application of non-military sanctions under Article 16, the most innovative part of the Covenant. If these deterrents, economic, financial, and diplomatic, failed, the Council could recommend to the states what military measures might be applied against the transgressor. Intended to prevent states from going to war, the final sanction in the Covenant was the resort to arms. If moral force failed, Wilson told the peace conference on 31 May 1919, ‘we must not close our eyes to the fact that in the last analysis the military and naval strength of the great Powers will be the final guarantee of the peace of the world’. Though theoretically the obligations imposed on all states were equal, in the absence of the United States the burden of enforcement would rest upon France and Britain. This made it more difficult to translate an imperfect collective security system into a working mechanism. The problem ran much deeper than the issue of American participation.

There was no way to guarantee that members would fulfil their responsibilities and enforce the sanctions outlined in Article 16, yet the system depended on the assumption that states would be deterred from ‘illegal’ war because they knew that sanctions would be imposed. The circularity of the argument exposed one of the League’s fundamental weaknesses, for which there could be no cure.

There was a considerable debate, at the time and later, over whether the system of mutual security rested on world opinion or the application of force. The gap between the normative rules in the Covenant and the realities of international behaviour was recognized from the start. In the very first years of the League’s existence efforts were made to modify Articles 10 and 16. The British warmly supported the Canadian attempt to weaken the security provisions in the two articles and would have happily abandoned the former if that would have satisfied the Americans. Though not actually amended, the articles were so modified by interpretation that Article 10 lost all significance and Article 16 was seriously qualified. Rules of guidance adopted in 1921 allowed the states to decide whether a breach of the peace requiring economic sanctions had occurred. The Assembly also redefined the concept of ‘immediate and absolute’ action to include a ‘gradual and partial’ boycott. As a result of a French veto these rules never acquired legal force, but on the one occasion when sanctions were imposed, against Italy in 1935, it was the French who insisted on their relevance. The debates over Articles 10 and 16 in 1921 and 1923 divided the League membership into contending blocs under British and French leadership. Their battles over the security provisions of the Covenant continued into the 1930s.

The so-called ‘gaps’ in the Covenant stemmed from the realities of international life. So did the implementation of other provisions; internationalism and equality between member states were limited in practice. State sovereignty was absolute. From the start, states were free to join the League on the basis of minimum qualifications or to leave after satisfying purely formal conditions. The unanimity rule in the Covenant preserved state independence, for it meant that no state could be bound to a decision against its own will, while various provisions safeguarded ‘regional understandings’ and the domestic jurisdiction of the state from outside interference. Though the League was to be more than an enlarged version of the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe, the founders recognized the superior position and responsibilities of the great powers. The Council and Assembly had concurrent jurisdiction over breaches of the peace and were given parallel authority to deal with any matter coming under the League’s auspices, but Articles 11 through 17 provided the Council with a special role in the actual settlement of disputes and the application of sanctions. Article 4 permitted the
Council to deal with ‘any matter within the sphere of action of the League or affecting the peace of the world’. According to the Covenant, the Council was to meet at least once a year, the Assembly at ‘stated intervals’; in practice, the Council met quarterly and the Assembly annually in September. The Council became the League’s administrative body, the permanent status of its great-power members confirming the traditional distinctions between categories of states. Though the small powers increasingly referred threats to the peace to the Assembly, the latter was seen as a public forum in which world opinion could be mobilized rather than as the initiator of positive action. While it was the smaller states that felt they had the most to gain from the new organization, even here their statesmen were driven to look elsewhere for protection. In view of growing British political disinterest, the more vulnerable states gravitated towards France. The small states were divided on whether the security provisions should be strengthened or weakened, depending on the views of their would-be protectors. The unattached states, mainly the neutrals (non-belligerents during the war) and the Baltic nations, tended to support the existing League guarantees. Whatever their positions, the representatives of the smaller nations found in Geneva an important public platform and a unique opportunity to be heard in the corridors of power. Giuseppi Motta of Switzerland, Edvard Beneš of Czechoslovakia, Joseph Bech of Luxembourg, and Paul Hymans of Belgium became familiar figures on the international stage when the League ended its itinerant existence in 1922 and took up residence in Geneva. Those outside the organization showed, at first, little inclination to co-operate with the new body. The Harding administration would have nothing to do with the League: the State Department did not even reply to League enquiries. In 1923, when Secretary of State Hughes agreed to send an ‘unofficial observer’ to the League’s Opium Committee and to appoint a consular official in Geneva to report on League matters, care was taken not to ask Congress for representational costs. Russian contact was restricted to humanitarian and technical matters, co-operation with the League’s high commissioner Fridtjof Nansen for the repatriation of prisoners of war and Russian refugees wishing to return to their homeland, and seeking advice on epidemics from the League’s Health Organization. Lenin viewed the League as a ‘band of robber nations’; it was, according to Chicherin in 1924, ‘a poorly screened coalition of victor-Powers created in order to secure their acquisitions and conquests’. Even when

---

the Bolshevik government sought to end its diplomatic isolation, the League was still considered an instrument for the maintenance of an unjust and capitalist post-war order. Not everyone agreed that the ‘great experiment’ was one worth making.

II

If the League was accepted as part of the international landscape, it was because it did not attempt too much. The very choice of Sir Eric Drummond, a British Foreign Office official, to be the League’s first secretary-general rather than a political figure like Venizelos of Greece or Masaryk of Czechoslovakia underlined the limited conception of the organization’s future role. Drummond, a cautious Scot, possessed a sharp awareness of the realities of power. He cultivated his connections to London while trying to remain on good terms with Paris; he was always more concerned with conciliating the great powers than with the sensibilities of the small. In these early years he kept a close watch on Washington, hoping to bring the United States into the League’s orbit but above all avoiding action which might increase its hostility. Drummond preferred working quietly behind the scenes and intentionally minimized his public role. His restricted view both of his own position and the possibilities for League action, though not accepted by the members of the Secretariat, was understandable if not always defensible, given the generally sceptical and sometimes openly hostile environment in which the League operated and the reluctance of the member states to finance the new institution. The average annual cost of the League, the International Labour Organization, and the Permanent Court of International Justice at the Hague during the years 1920 to 1946 was just $5.5 million. Despite this shoestring budget, League officials were constantly badgered, particularly by the British, about costs, waste, and unnecessary expenditure.

To establish its position, the Council of the League moved rapidly to carry out the tasks assigned to it by the 1919 peace treaties. A plebiscite was carried out in the districts of Eupen and Malmédy in 1920 and the two districts were consequently transferred to Belgium. In the Saar, the Council created a five-member Governing Commission under a French chairman; almost immediately it found itself in open dispute with the Saarlanders. Tensions came to a head during the Ruhr crisis when the Saar coal-miners went on strike against their French owners. The League Council approved the doubling of the French military force and backed strict limitations on civil liberties, despite strong protests from the British and an outcry from the Germans. Once the Ruhr was evacuated and calm restored, the Council moved to replace the
somewhat authoritarian French chairman with a Canadian and then an American appointee. Peace was maintained. In Danzig, too, the Council found ways to contain the potentially explosive situation in which the rights of the resident majority German population clashed with the political and economic interests of the Polish government. The Council appointed a high commissioner (the first three were British) who, along with representatives of the Free City, created a constitution guaranteed by the League. The high commissioner, who resided in Danzig, was responsible for enforcing the settlement but the League Council was frequently asked to intervene in the numerous disputes between the free city and the Poles. The successful running of the city depended on a degree of economic prosperity as well as the general state of Polish–German relations. Much was owed to Drummond, who used his influence to keep Germans and Poles apart, defusing situations that might heighten the tension between Warsaw and Berlin.

The drafters of the Covenant believed that the main purpose of the League was to promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts between member states through arbitration, mediation, and conciliation. Given the circumstances of its birth, the League confined itself during its early history to the ‘small change’ of world affairs. It dealt with minor disputes and limited issues and not with the fundamental problems of reconstruction. During the first decade of its existence the Council, with the assistance of the secretary-general, intervened in seventeen disputes likely to lead to confrontation and on seven or eight occasions actually brought open hostilities to an end. There was no progression in the League’s success rate. Much depended on the attitude of the great powers on the Council, the local circumstances of the dispute, and the willingness of the disputants to accept proffered solutions. None of these cases involved the use of sanctions, so the League’s security system was not tested. On the contrary, the discussions on sanctions during the Corfu and Greek–Bulgarian disputes revealed the legal and practical complications of applying Article 16 and confirmed British hostility towards its implementation. At first the Council was only asked to take on cases where for one reason or another the Allied governments preferred not to act, such as the many clashes between states on the periphery of the former Russian empire where unsettled border conditions and nationalist aspirations were resolved by force. By 1926 Britain herself appealed to the League for a decision in its clash with Turkey over Mosul. However, the fundamental point had not changed: it took great-power agreement to reach any solution, which was in effect what the original drafters of the Covenant had intended.

The first dispute successfully resolved in 1920, despite Soviet objections, was between Finland and Sweden over the Åaland Islands. It
proved far more difficult to settle the question of Vilna, which was occupied by the Poles in 1920 in open breach of the truce imposed on Poland and Lithuania pending a Council decision on the boundary line between the two states. Fighting broke out and League efforts to organise a plebiscite failed. The Poles remained in possession of the city and the Lithuanians continued to protest. In 1923 the Conference of Ambassadors and not the League awarded the city to the Poles. It was not until four years later that the Council forced the two countries to negotiate. Both Germany and the Soviet Union had a specific interest in the outcome; both tried to worsen Polish–Lithuanian relations. Stresemann, as Germany was now a League member, and Maxim Litvinov, the deputy commissar for foreign affairs, in Geneva as an observer for the first time, supported the Council’s action. The public handshake between the two hostile dictators, Piłsudski and Voldemaras, ended the threat of war but not the bitter feelings on both sides. A series of minor quarrels kept Polish–Lithuanian relations on the Council agenda until March 1938, when a more aggressive Polish prime minister, taking advantage of the turbulence of the time, forced Lithuania to resume normal diplomatic relations under the threat of immediate invasion. The Poles and Lithuanians were also involved in the dispute over Memel, the former German port on the Baltic Sea given to the Lithuanians in 1919. Fighting between the two powers delayed its transfer and the Poles, backed by the French, argued that Memel, like Danzig, should be made a Free City. The prickly question was handed over to the Council under Article 11 in September 1923. The Council followed what would become normal procedure in subsequent years. The secretary-general conferred with the British representative on the Council, in this case Robert Cecil, who in turn consulted with the French and Italians. Assured of great-power co-operation, the Council created a commission of inquiry composed of individuals from states not involved in the conflict. An American chairman, Norman Davis, and his associates recommended that Memel be recognized as Lithuania’s main port but that the Poles be granted equal rights with others to use its facilities. Neither of the rivals were satisfied yet both agreed to accept the ruling. The commission’s proposals to protect the rights of the local German population proved inadequate and the German government took up the cause of the German Memellanders, who never accepted their Lithuanian masters and found it intolerable to be governed by their ‘inferiors’. Again, these national disputes required repeated Council intervention to keep the peace until Hitler took the matter into German hands in March 1939.

There was no agreement between the powers on the division of Upper Silesia, the peace-treaty flashpoint in Polish–German relations.
Poland’s claims were pressed by France while Britain and Italy supported Germany. The question was left to the Council to settle, and a complex arrangement (the final award of May 1922 consisted of 606 clauses) was devised by which Germany was awarded two-thirds of the territory and Poland given the lion’s share of the area’s mineral wealth and industrial plants as well as 350,000 Germans. The issue was bitterly fought between Paris and London, and the League decision was strongly criticized by the Foreign Office. There was uproar in Germany, where it added to the unpopularity of the weak Wirth government. Again, the Silesian judgement was maintained until the advent of Hitler. The territories prospered, but national tensions persisted. The Germans in Polish Silesia, though a minority, were landowners, industrial leaders, and professional men who organized a special pressure group, the Volksbund, to bring their grievances to the notice of the Minorities Commission with German support. The Poles in German Silesia, on the other hand, were peasants and workers who were far less politically literate and were poorly organized. This was the background to a sharp clash in 1928 between Stresemann and Zaleski, the Polish foreign minister, over minority rights.

The Italian seizure of Corfu in September 1923, arising out of disputes with Greece over Albania, illustrated how the ‘least of the great powers’ could get its way when France and Britain agreed to sacrifice justice for co-operation. Feelings ran high in Geneva. The Assembly, which met in September, took up the Greek cause when it appealed to the Council under Articles 12 and 15 of the Covenant. The Italians, however, insisted that the issue be settled by the Conference of Ambassadors, denying that the Council had any competence in a matter that was neither an act nor a threat of war. The real difficulty was that the League could not act initially because the British and French were in disagreement. The British favoured Council intervention but the French, involved in the Ruhr, supported Mussolini. On consideration the British drew back, unwilling to consider a naval demonstration, one possible League sanction, on their own. It was believed that the application of Article 16 was an inappropriate and inflexible way to cope with threats to the peace except in the context of an all-out war. The Italians got their way; it was the Conference of Ambassadors rather than the Council that took the operative decisions, though the British, conscious of domestic opinion, somewhat disguised the extent of their retreat. An investigating commission consisting of British, French, Japanese, and Italian representatives was constituted. When their report was received, only the Italian member considered that the Greek government was to blame, yet the conference judged that the Greeks should pay compensation. The Italian troops left Corfu but there was widespread
anger in Geneva. Mussolini had succeeded in having the conflict settled in a forum where Italian interests would be safeguarded and the Covenant ignored. The Council submitted the interpretative questions rising out of the Italian action to a special commission of jurists; in all cases but one the jurists unanimously found against the Italian interpretation of the League’s competencies. Because it was in everyone’s interest to avoid further wrangles, the legal question was removed from the Council agenda and the ambiguities in interpretation ignored. The Corfu case was a victory for realpolitik, the outcome hardly surprising given the attitudes of the key Council members. Though the French were perfectly content with the outcome of the Corfu incident, they argued that the system needed to be improved and tightened. Without concerted arrangements made beforehand and without designating against whom and in what circumstances sanctions would be applied, the advantage was with the aggressor. No British government publicly revealed its deep reservations about the whole feasibility of sanctions; the odium at home and in Geneva would have been too great. Sanctions remained the ‘big stick’ in the cupboard, though the British were convinced that the stick was made of paper.

The bitter taste left by this League ‘failure’ was forgotten two years later with the speedy resolution of the conflict between Bulgaria and Greece. In this case sanctions were threatened and the deterrent proved successful. In October 1925 Greek troops crossed over into Bulgaria and the Bulgarians, who were in no position to riposte, appealed to the Council. The secretary-general acted quickly and summoned the Council to meet in Paris. Briand, the acting president of the Council, took the initiative in demanding that both parties cease their military action and withdraw their forces within sixty hours. This appeal was backed by the Council; Briand had the support of Britain, unexpectedly represented by Austen Chamberlain who had just returned from Locarno and Italy. The combined pressure on the Greeks proved sufficient without invoking Article 16. An observer party was sent, a ceasefire arranged, and a commission of inquiry constituted. The verdict went against the Greeks, who were forced to pay £45,000 in reparation. Chamberlain, who chaired the subcommittee reporting to the Council, left the Greeks no option but to accept the Council’s decision. Great-power solidarity rather than the sanctions weapon determined the outcome. The successful resolution of the conflict was hailed as a victory for the League and contributed to an unwarranted optimism about the effectiveness of its coercive machinery.

If most of the League’s successes during the 1920s involved small states, the clash between Britain and Turkey over oil-rich Mosul in October 1924 suggested that the Council’s procedures could be used to
keep the peace in matters involving a great power, if that power was co-operative. The British appealed for a decision over Mosul in accordance with the agreement reached with the Turks at Lausanne in 1923. The Kurds, who were the majority in the disputed provinces, wanted independence; if not, they preferred incorporation into Britain’s mandate of Iraq, if the mandate was continued for twenty-five years, rather than return to Turkey. Despite delays, an inadmissible British claim for further territory for Iraq, and a Turkish rejection of the League procedure that was settled by a much-debated Permanent Court of International Justice ruling, the Council decision that Mosul should go to Iraq was implemented. The treaty between Turkey, Britain, and Iraq acknowledging the new boundary, almost identical with Lord Curzon’s suggested frontier at Lausanne, was signed at Ankara in June 1926. Turkish anger at the decision was mollified by a League-arranged loan, and in 1931 Mustapha Kemal suggested that Turkey would welcome an invitation to join the League.

Though most of these disputes might have been settled by the great powers without the League, Geneva provided a new means of settlement and the Council’s participation made it easier for the loser to accept unwelcome judgements. The flexible modes of procedure followed by the Council, the role of the Council president and the secretary-general, the use of the special commission, and the judicious employment of both private persuasion and public admonition added a new dimension to the older forms of diplomacy. A peacekeeping role that did not involve sanctions suited the British, who viewed the Geneva system primarily as a way to promote friendly co-operation, if not the French, who wanted something more. As the decade came to a close, this aspect of the League’s peacekeeping function had become part of the international landscape. Whatever the reservations in the chancelleries in Europe, they were not shared by the general public, particularly in Britain, where considerable press attention was given to the League’s successes and where the League of Nations Union, one of the most influential and largest pressure groups of the 1920s, kept up a considerable campaign in favour of the League’s role as peacekeeper.

III

The League also went to work implementing other aspects of the peace settlements. The Council and the Secretariat, though always in modest ways which would not challenge the authority of the member states, developed techniques for implementing the treaty clauses covering mandated territories and minority rights and for handling the new refugee problem which became a permanent feature of the post-war
scene. The Covenant provided for a Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC) of experts to advise the Council and receive annual reports from each of the mandatory powers for the fifteen mandated territories. Neither the Council nor the PMC could coerce the mandatory power; the commission could not even visit the territories or question the inhabitants. Instead, by relying on consultation and co-operation rather than on close surveillance or sharp criticism, the mandatories were led to consider the interests of the local population. The detailed examination of annual reports and local petitions by experts who, like the commission’s chairman Marquis Alberto Theodoli, were sympathetic but critical, had a positive effect on the mandatory representatives. The French were particularly sensitive to criticism about their policies in Syria and Lebanon; the British were forced to change tactics, more often with regard to Tanganyika than to Palestine; the Iraqis, who with British support emerged from mandate status to full sovereignty, were persuaded to make concessions to their own minorities. The PMC was assisted by a small secretariat headed by William Rappard, a forceful and dedicated Swiss jurist, who was determined to make the mandate system an effective demonstration of the League’s protection role. Neither he nor the commission as a whole questioned the moral basis of colonialism. The mandate system was based on the assumption that the world order was a hierarchical one but that the self-proclaimed civilized nations had a duty to improve the lot of the more backward people under their control. The mandatory powers were reminded that they had duties as well as rights, and for the ‘A’ mandates this included preparation for self-government. This was a highly legalistic and limited system of control, but it was the first international attempt to tackle the problems of dependent territories and to give a practical meaning to ‘reciprocal interest’ and ‘collective responsibility’. The often-protracted discussions between the commission and the mandate representatives encouraged unrest in the mandates and even in neighbouring colonial territories under direct rule, but this side-effect of the protection system did not detract from the influence of the commission. While it has been cogently argued that the mandate system was little more than a form of neo-colonialism, the work of the Mandates Commission undoubtedly contributed to the moderation of the existing structure of colonial rule in favour of the indigenous people.

The Great War had been ‘a watershed in the history of nationalism’. Stalemated on the battlefield, the belligerents had encouraged uprisings of every kind against the existing authorities. The Turkish attempt to wipe out the Armenians in 1915, resulting in the murder of between 800,000 and 1.3 million people, and the ethnic struggles in Poland between 1918 and 1920, which involved the decimation of the Jewish
population of the Ukraine on a scale and in a manner not seen before, gave substance to liberal fears that nationalism and self-determination might unleash uncontrollable and murderous instincts. The idea of protecting minorities by law was taken up by women’s groups, socialists, and pacifists at the end of the war. At the Paris peace conference the Comité des Délégations Juives auprès la Conférence de la Paix, an organization created by eastern European Jews and joined by some American Jews, agitated for the recognition of a collective Jewish identity and for the provision of the largest measure of Jewish autonomy possible. The Germans, too, even before the Versailles treaty was completed, were preparing to argue the case for minority rights to protect Germans living outside of Germany’s borders. The representatives of the great powers, aware of the problem, were not particularly anxious to tackle questions of political or cultural autonomy, while the successor states had every interest in burying the issue altogether. Nevertheless, as the creations of 1919 had left many minority groups, long at odds with their new political masters, exposed to dangers that were magnified by the granting of self-determination to some but not to all national groups, the peacemakers felt they had to offer some measure of protection. In so doing, albeit in a much-qualified manner, they extended the rules of international law. After the rejection of proposals to include the protection of minorities within the Covenant itself, the minority issue was finally directly and separately addressed at the peace conference with the creation of the Committee of New States in May 1919. It was no easy task: the committee was pressed for time (the German delegation was already in Paris), subject to all kinds of political constraints, and had in the background reports of fresh violence in eastern Europe. Dominated by its British and American members, the committee drafted model minority treaties, first for Poland and then for Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, Greece, and Romania. Despite bitter protests from their representatives, the Polish government, as a condition for recognition, had to grant in Articles 1–8 complete ‘protection of life and liberty to all inhabitants’ regardless of ‘birth, nationality, language, race or religion’ and to guarantee the free exercise of any ‘creed, religion or belief’ not inconsistent with public order or public morals. Article 9 gave special protection to the rights of non-Polish-speaking citizens. The Jews were dealt with specifically in two further articles. Article 10 laid down that the ‘Jewish communities of Poland’ could establish educational committees of their own choosing and would receive a share of public funds,

while Article 11 guaranteed that the Jewish Sabbath was to be respected and not used as a weapon against the Jews. This was not the recognition of ‘national autonomy’ that many of the Jewish representatives in Paris wanted, but it was at least an implicit recognition of the separate character of Jewry as being legitimate and inviolable. This measure of legitimacy applied only to the Jews in Poland; the special clauses relating to the Jews were not included in the other minority treaties. Still, it held out the hope of future amelioration at a time when the Jews were facing new and highly dangerous challenges to their very existence.

Poland provided the model for the whole series of subsequent minority treaties protecting the interests of racial, religious, and linguistic minorities. By 1924 thirteen states (Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Turkey, and Yugoslavia) had recognized minorities as collective entities and had agreed to respect their ‘national’ rights. Upper Silesia and, in 1932, Iraq were added to the list. The treaties were only applied to new or immature nations that had to be taught the rules of civilized behaviour; it was assumed that the great powers were in no need of such instruction. The successor states bitterly resented being singled out in this fashion; they struggled continuously either to extend the system to all or to dissolve it entirely. A universal regime was opposed by committee members on the grounds that it would involve an unacceptable right to interfere in the internal constitution of every country and would mean the negation of state sovereignty. It was hoped that the minorities, properly protected by international law, would eventually feel secure enough to assimilate into the life of a unitary nation-state. It was a final irony that the ‘assimilationist’ thesis should have been stood on its head by the National Socialists in Germany, who by giving a racial definition to nationality prepared the way for discrimination and exclusion before the Second World War. The exchanges of population, as in the Greco-Turkish case of 1923, were seen as exceptional and made necessary only because of the seeming impossibility of any other solution. While they did little to diminish the animosity that the Greek–Turkish war engendered, these population exchanges removed a source of considerable danger to relations between the two states.

In a modest way the peacemakers extended the rules of international law. The treaties did not guarantee ‘human’ but minority rights. The latter went far beyond the protection of religious freedom, as had been done with regard to Belgium in 1830 and Romania in 1878. The treaty states were required to assure equal civil and political rights; minorities were free to maintain their own religious, social, and educational institutions. In some instances specified minorities—the Ruthene
province in Czechoslovakia, the non-Greek communities of Mount Athos, and the non-Muslim minorities in Turkey—were given additional protection. Besides the treaties’ limited application to certain states only, rights of appeal and the procedures for the redress of grievances were very restricted. The minorities or their defenders could not appeal directly to the League Council, which alone had the right to call attention to infractions or the danger of infractions, and only the Council could take action. Complicated procedures for receiving and considering petitions were established in October 1920 which continued to be followed until the reforms of 1930. Approximately 55 per cent of all petitions were found receivable; complaints, along with the offending government’s defence, could be put on the Council’s agenda by its Minorities Committee, by a Council member, or by any League member under Article 11 (Lithuania used this procedure against Poland and Albania against Greece). After 1928, as a result of a Council ruling, this last practice ceased. Although the League could refer cases to the Permanent Court of International Justice, this was rarely done and minorities were not allowed to appeal to the court directly. In theory, the Council’s powers of redress were extensive. In practice, the state charged with violation had the right to sit as a voting member of the Council, so no actual coercive action could be taken. The emphasis was placed on negotiations between the Minorities Committee and the offending government. The real work was done by the minorities section of the Secretariat, a small group with never more than nine members, which was also responsible for the affairs of Danzig and the Saar. Its dedicated staff consulted with the government concerned either in Geneva or, in contrast to the Mandates Commission, in the country itself. Members could collect information locally and consult with petitioners, who had no further formal role in the investigative process. By operating in an informal and unpublicized fashion, it sought to find solutions acceptable to ‘offenders’ who generally preferred to avoid public censure. Minority groups protested against their official exclusion from the investigatory process and the behind-the-scenes approach which protected the accused government from unwelcome publicity. Pressure in 1930 by the Canadian Council representative, Raoul Dandurand, backed by Stresemann following a dispute with Poland over German minority rights in Upper Silesia, produced moderate procedural changes that regularized the report system and provided for greater publicity with regard to both complaints and recommended action.

The record of the League during the 1920s was uneven. As the minorities section tried to avoid reference to the Council, less is known about its successes than its failures. The quiet and continuing efforts of the minorities section did produce positive results: compensation for
expropriated property, the withdrawal of some restrictions on the edu-
cational, cultural, and religious activities of the minorities, and the
punishment of individual civil servants found guilty of acts of violence
and brutality. Minority groups continued to complain that it was diffi-
cult to mobilize public sympathy unless the minorities section would
make their grievances more widely known. Unwilling, perhaps, to
recognize that nothing that the League could do would change attitudes
which made discriminatory legislation politically popular, spokesmen
for the minorities had to rely on publicity. The success of the system
depended on the co-operation of the states. It appears that Lithuania and
Turkey were extremely hostile towards the League’s efforts, which
proved useless there. Poland, Greece, and Romania, on the other
hand, whose actions produced a continuous flow of complaints, did
modify offensive behaviour when subjected to strong pressure. The
Polish case had important political overtones, particularly after Germany
joined the League. For domestic purposes, Stresemann used the protec-
tion of the German minorities to gain nationalist support for the League.
The German representatives at Geneva encouraged petitions, mainly as
an anti-Polish move, but avoided escalating quarrels that might put in
question Germany’s League standing. It was in the 1930s that the
minority question became an explosive issue and the weaknesses of
the system fully exposed. The number of petitions fell dramatically
from its peak of 204 in 1930–1 to fifteen in 1936. The qualified
optimism of the 1920s evaporated in the colder political climate.
Germany was found to be at fault in the ‘Bernheim case’ of 1933,
concerning a German citizen of Jewish origin who had lived in Upper
Silesia, a case specifically brought to test the minorities protection
system. The Germans responded to the Council’s request for reform,
and conditions in Upper Silesia were somewhat improved. A few
months later the Germans asked that the Assembly consider the League’s
annual minority report. Two French proposals, made with the Bern-
heim case in mind, to extend minority protection gained general sup-
port but were blocked by the German delegates three days before
Germany withdrew from the League. In 1934 the Poles withdrew
from the minorities protection system entirely. In the larger context,
the minorities protection system could operate only because the treaty-
bound states were weak; the stronger nations could act with impunity.

Did the League-sponsored system magnify antagonisms by allowing
complaints to go forward? It seems highly unlikely. The national,
ethnic, and religious divisions that produced discrimination were so
deeply embedded in the societies concerned that neither the presence
nor the absence of the League regime made any difference in this
respect. At the very least, those at risk had some hope of being heard
and the international community took note of the need to protect the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities. Given the present muddled and generally unsuccessful attempts to deal with the dilemmas of nationalism and national rights, one can only envy the confidence and the ambition of a relatively small group of men and women who not only believed that the protection of minorities was an international responsibility, but who assumed that the League’s ‘powers of persuasion’ would convince governments, however reluctant, to accept externally established standards of behaviour.

Parallel steps were taken to tackle the ‘refugee problem’ on an international basis. Much of the credit for what was done must be given to Fridtjof Nansen, the famed explorer, who had been appointed by a reluctant Council to work on behalf of the repatriation of prisoners of war. As well as his position as high commissioner for Russian refugees, Nansen was also involved in famine-relief work in the Soviet Union, and through arrangements with Chicherin, the Soviet commissar for foreign affairs, provided an administrative framework for the League’s modest efforts in this direction. Nansen remained as high commissioner from 1921 until his death in 1930; by 1923 the adjective ‘Russian’ was dropped from his title and the commissioner took on other tasks, above all the settlement of Greek refugees in western Thrace, an exchange involving considerable numbers of people. Eventually this work, as well as the Bulgarian refugee problem, was handled by specially appointed League bodies. After 1924 the technical work was done by the International Labour Organization (ILO), and Nansen’s staff was transferred from the League Secretariat to the ILO. The newly named Refugee Service was responsible to both the high commissioner and the ILO, an unsatisfactory arrangement changed at the end of 1929 when staff and responsibilities returned to the high commissioner.

It was due to Nansen, an extraordinarily creative and personally spartan and selfless figure, and the ILO Refugee Service that the first modest but practical steps were taken to deal with what appeared to be overwhelming numbers of displaced people. Various innovative ways were found to deal with what unexpectedly became a continuing problem whose dimensions, contrary to what was thought at the time, grew rather than diminished. The ‘Nansen passport’, introduced in 1922 for Russian refugees, was extended to cover other specified refugee groups. Arrangements made with regard to the legal status of Russian refugees in 1928 were similarly extended in 1933 and 1938. The ILO Refugee Service between 1925 and 1929 was able to match refugees looking for jobs with potential employers in other countries; help was given with emigration formalities and transport arrangements.
Nansen's main concern towards the end of his life was with the resettlement of the Armenian refugees in Soviet Armenia. League support was extremely limited; only the barest administrative expenses were paid (Nansen had no salary) and funds had to be raised from outside sources. Some money was raised from the refugees, who were required to pay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Russian</th>
<th>Armenian</th>
<th>Russian</th>
<th>Armenian</th>
<th>Syrian</th>
<th>Turkish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>2,465</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>2,401</td>
<td>263</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestine Empire</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>6,784</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3,600</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>26,494</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>23,848</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>76,000</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>119,294</td>
<td>500</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechoslovakia</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>23,800</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danzig</td>
<td>300</td>
<td></td>
<td>269</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>300</td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>16,822</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>14,313</td>
<td></td>
<td>14,314</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>400,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>400,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>2,075</td>
<td>42,002</td>
<td>2,026</td>
<td>38,834</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>5,294</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4,751</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>1,154</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>1,154</td>
<td>603</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>2,356</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2,356</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>99,815</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>70,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>500</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>500</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>2,268</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>2,266</td>
<td>250</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>86,500</td>
<td></td>
<td>85,842</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>4,963</td>
<td>866</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yugoslavia</td>
<td>25,350</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>26,521</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Russia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other countries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>751,161</td>
<td>168,804</td>
<td>912,401</td>
<td>153,831</td>
<td>20,700</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for the annual stamp on their Nansen passports. Other contributions came from private and public sources. In 1927 the fund reached 66,000 Swiss francs; by 1935 it amounted to 338,000 Swiss francs. Nansen’s hopes were repeatedly frustrated by the lack of even small sums of money. The prospects were hardly encouraging when the new and autonomous Nansen International Office for Refugees was created in 1931 with a minute administrative budget. The Assembly decided at the same time that it was to be closed down at the end of 1938, a reflection of the still common assumption that the refugee problem was a temporary one for which solutions would be found. Further innovative approaches to solving the refugee problem during the early 1930s were stifled by the unwillingness of the League statesmen to face questions that were becoming politically embarrassing at home as well as highly contentious abroad. As the number of ‘political’ refugees swelled, the member states became increasingly reluctant to extend the scope of the League’s responsibilities. The first steps taken to force nations to recognize that there were responsibilities that did not cease with their national borders were hardly sufficient to cope with the refugees from Russia, Mussolini’s Italy and Franco’s Spain, quite apart from Hitler’s later massive assault on what was left of the international regime.

IV

Pre-war trends toward international humanitarian co-operation both on the part of governmental and private organizations meant that it was expected that the League Covenant should include some provision for promoting prosperity, welfare, and social justice. The non-political dimensions of inter-state relations had to be recognized despite the reluctance of some of the peacemakers. Many of the League’s new institutions had their origins in the public international unions and bureaux of the late nineteenth century. Their representatives and supporters as well as propagandists for other causes came to Paris in 1919 to press the case for international recognition. The newly created International Labour Organization (Part XIII of the Versailles treaty) and Articles 23 to 25 of the Covenant were based on the contested and unsubstantiated claim, in the words of the ILO constitution, that ‘Universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice’. Few statesmen accepted the premise that war was the product of human injustice and that the improvement of the conditions of life would promote peace. Yet it was under this banner that the fifteen members of the Commission on International Labour Legislation, representing the voice of labour, achieved recognition and independent status for the ILO. British influence and the eloquent pleas of General
Smuts overcame President Wilson’s objections to the vague mandate given the League for action in non-political matters. Though the League was intended to be little more than an umbrella organization for pre-war humanitarian bodies, the unwillingness of the Americans to associate themselves with the new international organization left many of these outside the League circle. As a result of the efforts of a few individuals and the members of the League Secretariat, a massive proliferation of new specialized bodies took place under Article 23, ranging in their concerns and membership from the Committee on Communications and Transit to the highly informal International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation, whose members paid their own fares to annual meetings. As in so many other respects, the expansion of the League’s activities was both a response to existing conditions and a catalyst for further growth. Despite the League’s Eurocentric political bias, the work of these agencies was truly international and non-League members were gradually drawn in. The Secretariat assumed a back-up function that became integral to the internationalization of problems dealt with by private individuals and associations who benefited from the exchange of views and documentation that it could provide. Debates in the Assembly publicized its activities and made the mobilization of public and official support more effective and efficient.

The work of the League in these non-political spheres had two different aims: to establish its competence and expertise in order to gain the confidence of member states, and to make the League itself meaningful to the states by involving them continuously in its efforts. While it could count on the applause of some, there were always those League members who felt that their activities violated the principles of state sovereignty. And even where no objections on principle were raised, representatives were not inclined to dig into their national pockets to foster the League’s humanitarian work. Only the small Secretariat provided the continuity and ‘institutional memory’ so essential to success. The early appointees to the Secretariat were men of considerable independence, with broader horizons and greater ambitions than the secretary-general. Whatever the length of their tenure, men like Jean Monnet, William Rappard, Sir Arthur Salter, and Thanassis Aghnides left permanent marks on the infant organization and contributed to the development of an international civil service. The Secretariat, moreover, encouraged co-operation with whatever groups, official or private, that would further the League’s work. It was not only in the financial and economic fields that the appetite for expert advice created a demand for the League’s services. Many of the committees and commissions that developed in the 1920s were small, underfunded, and dependent on the work of a few activists, but their
existence increased the reputation and responsibilities of the League. Whether with regard to the protection of women and children or to technical assistance and health programmes, the League’s humanitarian work involved political decisions, often of a contentious nature. In 1929 China asked for assistance in the field of public health and in 1931 requested financial and economic advice. Salter went out for a six-week visit and, along with two other League officials, devised and introduced a plan of reconstruction that so angered the Japanese that it had to be withdrawn. The Secretariat was always cautious and highly conscious of its limited mandate.

In the 1920s the League contributed to the multilateral economic and fiscal discussions that so dominated international diplomacy; one of its key functions was to create data banks and to foster the exchange of information and views. Already in October 1920 the League Council, following the recommendations of Léon Bourgeois, created a committee that was divided into two sections, an economic section staffed by ‘experts’ acting in their personal capacities and recruited from government departments of trade and commerce, and a financial section made up of officials from finance ministries and distinguished bankers. Close links with ruling elites at home proved necessary and exceedingly useful. Experts worked closely with the Council, reinforcing the dominant role of the wealthier and larger states, with Britain, in the absence of the Americans, setting the pace. Participants in both committees favoured the more orthodox multilateralist and free-trade approaches of the absent official American representatives whose support was so essential for continental reconstruction. The Economic Committee worked slowly, unwilling or unable to act until questions were ‘ripe’ for consideration. Much effort was expended on such technical questions as the unification and simplification of customs duties and bills of international credit, while the more critical questions of tariffs and other forms of import-and-export prohibitions were postponed until an international consensus had emerged. The failure to tackle such key questions was sharply criticized at the World Economic Conference of 1927 and the role of the experts queried. Appointed in their personal capacity, rather than as state representatives, they were accused either of being spokesmen for their countries or, on the contrary, of being too theoretical and apolitical in their approach to contemporary questions. The Financial Committee was more active and successful. The committee, mainly consisting of bankers and finance ministry officials, opened the way for new forms of assistance to states in financial difficulties even while it looked backwards to the restoration of the pre-war financial system and the return to the so-called automatic gold standard.
The League sponsored or serviced most of the more important financial and economic conferences of the period. The Brussels conference of 1921, the first international conference devoted only to financial and monetary problems, drew on the expertise of civil servants, parliamentarians, businessmen, and financiers. A mass of statistical information was collected. The experts’ recommendations for dealing with the current financial difficulties were highly orthodox, but few of the concrete proposals for dealing with inflation, exchange-rate instability, and the lack of capital for reconstruction and monetary stabilization could be implemented. The most innovative proposal, the establishment of an international commission of the League of Nations to sponsor reconstruction loans and international credits, was opposed by the United States which alone could finance loans on the necessary scale. Other less utopian schemes were similarly stillborn, given American ‘ambivalence toward international entanglements, the struggle over war debts and reparations, and disagreements among policymakers over whether financial problems could simply be delegated to the market’.5

A second international financial conference, initiated by Britain and France in the hope that the Americans would attend but serviced by the League, took place in 1922 as part of the Genoa conference. Far less ambitious in their aims, the delegates focused primarily on the restoration of the gold standard and the promotion of exchange-rate stability. Once again the questions of war debts and reparations, as well as official American abstention from the proceedings and their opposition to the extension of the gold-exchange system, made progress difficult. The French, Belgians, and Italians had no wish to stabilize their currencies, which had depreciated more rapidly than sterling, at pre-war parities. They believed that devaluation would lead to a loss of confidence in their currencies, hurt the politically important middle classes, raise prices, and result in unemployment and social unrest. They preferred to wait until their currencies naturally regained their pre-war value before acting. The gold-exchange system, supported by the British but only partially endorsed at Genoa, enabled London to continue as a major financial centre while disguising the full impact of Britain’s growing trade deficit. The system was viewed by the Americans as an unwarranted and dangerous official intrusion in the international monetary system and as a British device intended to divert business from New York to London. The French also opposed formalizing the gold-exchange system. Citing their own experiences with the Bank of France, they disliked giving additional discretionary powers to the central banks and opposed changes that would reinforce the financial

predominance of London and New York. While governments were still arguing about war debts and reparations, it was unlikely that central bankers, however independent, could successfully collaborate in restoring the stability of the international financial system. The League’s most ambitious effort was the Economic Conference of 1927 with its broad mandate and large membership—194 delegates and 226 experts, all chosen as private individuals, from fifty member and non-member states including the United States, Soviet Union, and Turkey. The French were the prime movers; the British had dragged their feet, fearing its possible anti-American bias and attacks on their own economic practices. There was extensive preparation for this four-day meeting, with some seventy separate studies issued by the economic and financial section of the Secretariat. The emphasis was shifted from the financial sphere to questions of international trade since, with the stabilization of most national currencies, it was believed that the period of disordered public finances and depreciated currencies was reaching an end. There were many recommendations for removing the hindrances to the ‘free flow of labour, capital and goods’, but few were implemented. The prophetic warnings and the wise words of 1927 were soon forgotten when governments were faced with the problems of shrinking trade, depressed prices, and rising unemployment. The push towards international co-operation provided by the League, through its technical and auxiliary functions, was already losing ground in the colder economic climate of the early 1930s.

In its economic, social, and humanitarian work the League made painstaking progress. The Secretariat and the technical organizations were able to collect and collate information on a world scale and to create international standards of behaviour. In many instances they successfully convinced the governments of both member and non-member states to adjust their national legislation to meet such standards. Constructive precedents were set for combining the work of the League with private and public organizations and for working out common modes of procedure in the pursuit of economic, social, and cultural goals. A few visionaries hoped that, in dealing with problems that lay outside the realm of traditional diplomacy, the League would provide examples of international co-operation that could be transferred to the political arena. It was only in the late 1930s, when the League had lost all its political credibility, that its functional work came to be regarded as its most important and main redeeming feature. In the 1920s European statesmen paid little attention to the League’s expanding humanitarian role and focused instead on its peacekeeping activities, where progress was modest, and on the search for a disarmament formula, which never came within its grasp.
V

Given the enormity and costs of the Great War and the heavy burden placed on all European populations, it was inevitable that post-war governments should be urged to cut their armed forces and their expenditure on arms. Geneva became the natural focal point for much of this agitation. The pursuit of disarmament absorbed more of the League’s attention, time, and energy than any other problem. It turned out not only to be a futile quest but one that helped to destroy the League’s credibility in the political arena. Owing to President Wilson’s insistence, Article 8 of the Covenant asserted that ‘the maintenance of peace requires the reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement by common action of international obligations’, and required the Council, aided by a permanent commission (Article 9), to formulate plans for such a reduction. Both the preamble to Part V of the Versailles treaty and the official Allied reply to German objections to the peace treaty presented the German disarmament requirements as being ‘first steps towards that general reduction and limitation of armaments which they seek to bring about as one of the most fruitful preventatives of war, and which it will be one of the first duties of the League of Nations to promote’. Behind these promises, which had a powerful moral force regardless of whether they were legally binding, was the widespread belief on both sides of the Atlantic that great armaments led inevitably to war and that the arms race had led directly to the catastrophe of 1914. Apart from the Bolshevik view that war was implicit in the final stage of capitalist development and the 1914–18 conflict only the first of a series of imperialist wars, there were many variants on this theme. They extended from conspiracy theories about the influence of the makers of armaments (the so-called ‘merchants of death’) and international bankers, to the more sophisticated claims that war expenditure stimulated nationalism, encouraged national enmities, and diverted resources from more productive and socially useful purposes that would reduce the risk of conflict. It was owing to the efforts of a few individuals that the question of international disarmament was seriously pursued after the first flush of enthusiasm had died. Once it was started, however, the growing strength of public feeling on the subject meant the process acquired a momentum of its own. No government wished to be blamed for failure. Whatever the difficulties, the disarmers argued that the

post-war period was an ideal time to implement the Covenant’s promise. Despite evasion of their armament restrictions, of far more concern to the French than the British, the Germans were effectively disarmed and posed no immediate threat to peace. The images of the recent war were fresh and the case for disarmament had strong support at the popular level in Britain and France. There were powerful financial reasons for all states to seek an arms-limitation agreement.

The difficulties of international disarmament were real and apparent from the start. Without resolute political leadership it proved difficult to advance the case for arms limitation. When it came to discussing troops, ships, or planes, the military men came into their own and the prospects of an arms agreement receded. Many technical difficulties were political arguments ‘dressed up in uniform’, but there were also formidable problems to be overcome when the different services of more than forty nations had to be considered. Weapon systems were different, equivalents hard to find, and ratios difficult to establish. Methods of control and inspection raised fundamental questions about sovereignty and independence. The problems of general disarmament were and are always daunting. While the smaller nations were the most insistent that action was required, neither of the two key League members, Britain and France, thought that disarmament would promote peace. None of the service chiefs in either country believed in arms reduction. On both sides of the Channel they shared the assumption that there was no substitute for military power in underwriting the safety of the state.

Before 1925 there was no British disarmament policy. Soon after the war ended the army reverted to voluntary service and drastic cuts were made in Britain’s military establishment. The decision reached in 1919 that there would be no European war for the next ten years, the so-called ‘Ten Year Rule’, became the basis for Treasury demands for reductions in all three service estimates. It imposed its control only over the army. In 1922 and 1924 the air force and navy successfully sustained their claims for increased expenditure. Throughout the 1920s the British were spending as much, if not more, than any other power on their armed services, and the figures never fell below their pre-1914 levels. The services never got all they wished, and in absolute terms the money spent on the three services fell from 1925 until 1934. The British consequently argued in Geneva that they were already disarmed and barely had the necessary troops to carry out their existing imperial responsibilities. The burden on the navy was exceptionally heavy; it had no option but to underwrite Britain’s global position, but even the ‘senior service’ suffered from drives for economy. Herein lay another reason for successive cabinets to seek reductions in Britain’s European commitments.
The French position was entirely consistent and perfectly logical. The Versailles treaty had not provided the measure of safety considered necessary before Germany returned to her great-power status. There was no Anglo-American guarantee or British alliance. There were even difficulties in underwriting the treaty position and enforcing German disarmament. The only way the continental status quo could be preserved was to maintain France’s military strength. Ultimately, the French army was the guarantor of the peace of Europe. Such was the dread of German revival that numerical superiority in soldiers and in armaments did not calm French fears. Germany’s superiority in population and industrial potential required constant vigilance. Those in control of French defence policy knew that, despite its quantitative superiority, the French army was poorly equipped, inadequately trained, badly led, and suffering from poor morale. Its large air force, despite British talk of the French bombing threat, consisted mainly of obsolete planes. Only the French navy, after the Washington Naval Conference, was set on a programme of expansion and improvement. No French prime minister would consider a reduction in French forces without a strengthened security system backed by effective sanctions. The French never fully spelled out what they meant by such a system, but its effectiveness, in the absence of a British guarantee which was France’s first priority, depended on the British assumption of expanded League responsibilities that London was clearly reluctant to assume. In the French view, security had to precede disarmament.

The League’s initial efforts to promote disarmament brought little progress or credit. All governments theoretically favoured disarmament; in practice, each was mainly anxious to see the others disarm. On 17 May 1920 the League Council created its Permanent Advisory Committee (PAC) on military, naval, and air matters, composed of representatives drawn from the armed services of the member states. Any hopes that they might agree on how force levels might be set were rapidly dispelled. The discussion led only to the unsurprising conclusion that disarmament was impracticable. The first League Assembly, meeting in September 1920, would not let the matter rest, and when the three Scandinavian members put disarmament on the agenda there was a general demand that a broader group of experts should be assembled who did not have their hands tied by governments. As a consequence, the Council created, in addition to the PAC, a Temporary Mixed Commission (TMC) composed of experts competent in ‘political, economic and social matters’, along with representatives from the PAC, the League Financial Commission, and the ILO. For its first two years of work, however, the TMC confined itself to examining how to control the traffic in and private manufacture of armaments, and to conducting a
statistical inquiry into the present state of armaments possessed by League members. It was the success of the Washington Naval Conference (12 November 1921–6 February 1922) that encouraged Assembly optimism on the possibilities of more ambitious measures. Though the internationalists disliked talks that were held outside the League, at Washington agreement was reached and battleships were actually scrapped.

The Washington treaties were the product of specific domestic requirements in each of the three chief negotiating states, and were linked with political agreements affecting China and the Pacific area. The United States, the strongest potential naval power, was willing to make concessions to avoid the expenditure of a naval race. The American shipbuilding programme of 1916 was already stalled, with no ship more than 45 per cent completed. Warren Harding, the new Republican president, was faced with a major Congressional attack on the completion of the programme just when the Navy Department had submitted yet another construction bill. Though the ‘big navy’ group won powerful support in the Senate, conventional wisdom in a country recovering from a post-war recession suggested that money spent on defence was money wasted. The shaggy-haired Republican senator from Idaho, Senator William Borah, brought together a formidable collection of women, labour, churchmen, pacifists, and teetotallers to oppose the president’s bill. Borah’s resolution of December 1920 calling on the president to work towards a naval limitation treaty with Britain and Japan won adherents in the Senate. Charles Evans Hughes, the secretary of state, while neither for nor against naval building, was extremely hostile towards the Anglo-Japanese alliance and prepared to co-operate with the British only if the alliance was terminated. Japan, seen as the most probable future threat to the Pacific equilibrium, had progressed furthest with its naval plans, but financial resources were undoubtedly strained. Completion of its naval building programme would account for half the Japanese budget at a time when exports were down and tax revenues reduced. The Japanese premier, Hara Kai, a former diplomat who would be assassinated on the day the Washington conference opened, was engaged in a major political battle in Tokyo. He needed, for political and economic reasons, an agreement with the United States even if this meant withdrawing from activist policies in China and possibly abandoning the Anglo-Japanese treaty. It was important that Japan’s new place in north-east Asia be recognized, but a conservative position might bring useful recompense. The British, too, who were about to take their own conference initiative when the American invitation arrived, found it more advantageous to negotiate with the United States than to engage in a costly capital-ship naval race that they might lose. If America chose ‘to put up the money and persevere,
[it would] have a good chance of becoming the strongest Naval Power in the world’, Winston Churchill warned on 23 July 1921, ‘and thus obtaining the complete mastery of the Pacific’. In early 1921 the British government gave the go-ahead for the construction of eight super-dreadnoughts, but preferred to compromise. The Admiralty talked almost exclusively of a ‘one power standard’ or ‘equality with any other power’. Building ships in response to the American threat at a time when an ‘anti-waste’ campaign had been launched fuelled a bitter Treasury–Admiralty battle. Lloyd George desperately wanted a foreign-policy success to restore his political credit; the Irish problem was barely settled and there were difficulties in both Europe and in the Middle East. Slowly and reluctantly, the Foreign Office decided that in the interests of American co-operation, the Anglo-Japanese alliance would have to go. As the Dominions were divided over the wisdom of such a move, a tripartite solution was the best possible compromise.

Once Harding issued his invitation to Washington, the British fused their naval and Pacific policies. They expected little from the conference or from Hughes. The delegation led by Arthur Balfour, after a very stormy crossing, found it was in no position to refuse the Hughes proposal for a ten-year building holiday for capital ships. Britain, the United States, and Japan accepted the proffered 5–5–3 ratio in tonnage for capital ships. France, after raising major objections, accepted a capital-ship ratio of 1.75 and parity with Italy on the condition that these limits did not apply to smaller ships, namely cruisers and submarines (which the British wished to abolish entirely). The ‘Washington system’ was a limited one; the parity arrangements applied only to capital ships and for a ten-year period. The British would not extend the ratios to other classes of auxiliary vessels. As the British had a substantial advantage in cruisers, essential for the protection of their worldwide trade, they agreed only that cruisers should not exceed 10,000 tons or mount anything larger than eight-inch guns. The British still led the Americans in tonnage and number in every category of ship. The Admiralty was prepared to accept the new ratios; its chief concern was with the ten-year holiday, that would damage Britain’s shipbuilding capacity. The Japanese had to accept a lower ratio than they wished but won a non-fortification clause preventing either the British or the Americans from developing or operating bases within 3,000 miles of Japan. Pearl Harbor and Singapore, exempted from the agreement, were their nearest bases;

---

neither could challenge the Japanese domination of east Asian waters. On the political side, neither the Four Power treaty, in which the four signatories (the United States, Britain, Japan, and France) guaranteed each others’ rights in insular possessions in the Pacific and agreed to concert together if their rights were threatened, nor the Nine Power treaties, which guaranteed the territorial integrity and administrative independence of China and reaffirmed the ‘Open Door’ principle, committed any of the participants to action. The Americans were freed from the threat of the Anglo-Japanese alliance which had previously been central to their naval planning. The British, having won a face-saving way of withdrawing from the Japanese alliance through the Four Power pact, thought they could placate the Japanese and get the Americans to share their policing responsibilities in the Far East. The Nine Power treaty was without real substance. It contained no means of enforcement and the Japanese believed that it did not apply to Manchuria, the part of China they were intent on controlling. The changed status quo in the Pacific was recognized and momentarily stabilized. It was enough to make possible the negotiation of an arms-reduction treaty. The Treaty of Locarno did not provide a similar basis for general disarmament in Europe.

Though the Washington treaties have evoked a great deal of historical criticism, in recent years a more positive verdict has emerged. The British had retained their naval supremacy without engaging in a costly race with the Americans, who did not build up to the treaty limits. The Royal Navy scrapped mainly old and obsolete vessels and abandoned only a paper programme of new construction. Having decided that the Royal Navy needed a 50 per cent margin of capital-ship superiority over the Japanese, the Washington conference gave the British 60 per cent. In European waters the Royal Navy was assured total dominance. The British were defeated solely on their demand that submarines should be outlawed. More contentious is the issue of the abandonment of the Japanese alliance, though it seems doubtful whether its retention would have kept the Japanese navalists in check or prevented Japanese expansion in China. The Americans did well out of the treaty, given the fact that Congress was reluctant to appropriate money for building a fleet, especially expensive capital ships. It might well have baulked at appropriating the large sums needed to develop bases in the western Pacific for an offensive war. The Japanese home islands were safer than before and Tokyo saved from a costly naval building programme that might have triggered an American response. Each of the three main naval powers emerged in a better position than would have been the case had there been no naval limitation treaty at all. France suffered a diplomatic check, but the French navy achieved its minimum demands and was left free to
build the number of light ships and submarines needed to secure its naval objectives. The French lost the propaganda battle and were portrayed in the American press as bellicose militarists. The French delegation had no opportunity to act as mediators between Britain and the United States, as Briand had hoped. Worse still, Briand, who resented Britain’s failure to consider France’s entitlement to special treatment, handled the situation badly and left the conference having alienated both the Anglo-Saxon powers. His attempts to link naval and land disarmament angered the Americans, and his efforts to smooth the way for a sympathetic consideration of France’s financial difficulties were ruined by the American press campaign. The Italians felt that they had won a victory in securing parity with France, and in principle this was a check on French ambitions. Given that French finances precluded building capital ships (France already led Italy in this category) and it was assumed that the Italians would be financially unable to build up to the tonnage limited in other categories, the French navalists should have been content with what had been achieved at Washington. The relegation of France to the second rank of naval powers, however, and the forced acceptance of parity with Italy was a severe blow to the *amour propre* of the naval establishment.

The treaties won considerable popular acclaim (except in some naval circles, above all in Japan) and raised considerable hope that they would mark, in President Harding’s words, ‘the beginning of a new and better epoch in human affairs’. There were high expectations not only that other naval agreements would follow but that the Washington example would serve as the first step towards a general disarmament programme. There were obvious reasons for the optimism about naval disarmament in the 1920s. Technically, naval limitation was a less complex problem than land or air disarmament. Fewer states were involved and the major naval powers could arrange matters to their satisfaction without the interference of small and often landlocked nations. There was not the same variety of weaponry, concealment was difficult, the construction of ships was slow, and the possibilities of conversion limited. Shipbuilding was a highly expensive proposition and the ‘High Seas’ governments wanted to avoid naval races where it was possible. Naval-limitation systems could be self-contained, as the French discovered when they unsuccessfully tried to extend the Washington discussions to include land forces. The naval treaty, however, could not be applied to other naval sub-systems, nor could naval disarmament be linked with other forms of arms reductions. A League-sponsored meeting at Rome in

February 1924 broke up without any results at all. France and Italy would find their Mediterranean concerns of far greater concern than the global naval balance, and the British failed to bring either naval power into the extended Washington system after 1930.

The French failure at Washington was compounded by the collapse of the Cannes negotiations in January 1922, when once again the British refused to provide the extensive treaty guarantees that Briand and Poincaré so anxiously sought. France was also faced with further unwelcome disarmament proposals on the League’s Temporary Mixed Commission during early 1922. The British delegate, Lord Esher, put forward the formula of applying ratios, like the Washington treaty’s naval ratios, to the size of European armies (colonial forces were excluded from the calculations). The French hated this ‘simplistic’ and ‘entirely arbitrary’ scheme, and since it lacked any official British support it was soon abandoned. It was with French backing that the representatives of the smaller states, including Edvard Beneš of Czechoslovakia and Paul Hymans of Belgium, took the initiative in raising the security question as the necessary preliminary to any disarmament agreement. On 27 September 1922 the Third League Assembly adopted ‘Resolution XIV’ underlining the indissoluble connection between security and disarmament and making a disarmament agreement conditional upon the conclusion of a general defensive pact. The result of this was new action in the Temporary Mixed Commission during 1923. The Anglo-French experts produced separate treaties which were eventually combined to form a single Draft Treaty of Mutual Assistance. Presented to the General Assembly in September 1923—hardly an auspicious time in Franco-German or Anglo-French relations—the Draft Treaty required all signatories to come to the aid of any signatory on the same continent who was the victim of aggression. The powers of the Council were expanded and strengthened; it could designate the aggressor and decide on the application of sanctions, including the organization of military forces. This mutual guarantee was tied to the acceptance of a general disarmament plan and provision was made for a detailed disarmament scheme to follow. Most of the European states, including France, accepted the Draft Treaty, though many with reservations. Despite its British origins, Ramsay MacDonald’s Labour government buried the proposal when it rejected the plan on 5 July 1924. The most important objection was the increased burden placed on Britain’s overstretched armed forces. The expanded role of the Council would turn the League into that ‘super-state’ rejected by all British governments. The Dominions, particularly Canada, and the Scandinavian countries were equally hostile, nor did the scheme find any favour with the American, Soviet, or German governments. Even the French were
doubtful whether the provisions for assistance were sufficient to warrant reductions in their military forces.

Such was the momentum, however, behind the French effort to find some way out of their security dilemma and the desire of the Assembly for a disarmament conference that the discussions had to continue. No Labour government in London, kept in power by the Liberals, among the most active political supporters of the League, could turn its face against disarmament. Already in his letter rejecting the Draft Treaty, MacDonald had declared his intention of calling a worldwide disarmament conference at an appropriate moment. Having checked the French during the London reparation talks of August 1924 and rejected Herriot’s attempt to secure some kind of Anglo-French pact, the Labour prime minister felt it politic to take some step in France’s direction. The Foreign Office, conscious of the French malaise, discussed the possibilities of a mutual guarantee against aggression which Germany could join. Such a pact would get the French out of the Rhineland, remove one of the main sources of German discontent, and encourage a new spirit of co-operation among the nations of Europe. This was the background to the ‘Geneva Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes’, the word ‘protocol’ used to indicate that the proposal was a gloss on the Covenant and not a departure from it. Both the socialist leaders, MacDonald and Herriot, attended the League Assembly in September 1924, the first time that either country was represented by its prime minister. MacDonald spoke of the need to admit Germany to the League and argued the case for compulsory arbitration. Herriot raised the question of sanctions: arbitration alone would not provide the compulsion needed to assure compliance and security. Further impetus for action came from an unconfirmed rumour that the Americans were about to call another disarmament conference outside the League. The ‘Geneva Protocol’ embodied a triple formula: arbitration, security, and disarmament. Its terms were hammered out in two committees: one on security, brilliantly chaired by Beneš of Czechoslovakia, and the other on the system of compulsory arbitration, headed by the Greek delegate, Politis. An automatic system for the settlement of all disputes was created, with the failure to accept arbitration regarded as the test of aggression. The Geneva Protocol was intended to fill the ‘gap’ in the Covenant created by Articles 12 and 15; under the new terms, no state could resort to war except with the consent or at the behest of the Council. Any state going to war after a judgement of the Permanent Court of International Justice, an arbitration body, or the Council was automatically judged the aggressor and would be subject to sanctions. All signatories would refer their judicial disputes to the Permanent Court and accept its judgement as final. In the
case of non-judicial disputes, where no unanimous decision could be reached in the Council the case would automatically be referred to arbitration and the award made binding. The Protocol would come into operation when a disarmament conference, called for June 1925, agreed on a general disarmament plan.

This tightening of the League’s general security system (matters falling within the state’s domestic jurisdiction, of course, were excluded) still left the final power of enforcing sanctions to the individual states. At most, it provided a correction to the juridical weakness of the Covenant. In the British view, the Protocol, even more than the Draft Treaty, would have placed an intolerable burden on their fleet and add unnecessary and dangerous commitments in areas where Britain had only limited interests. It was not an obligation that the government, or any of the Dominions, which strongly opposed the Protocol, was willing to accept. Acceptance would freeze the European status quo at a time when the Labour government was intent on some form of continental revision. The British representatives in Geneva had played a major role in the Protocol’s drafting during the autumn of 1924. In its final form, however, it would have extended the powers of the League in just those directions that no cabinet could sanction. This ‘harmless drug to soothe nerves’—MacDonald’s words—had little chance of success in London. It is doubtful that the Protocol would have been approved even if MacDonald had stayed in office. The victory of the Conservatives in the October 1924 election assured its rejection. The new cabinet was overwhelmingly opposed to its terms, the Foreign Office vehemently hostile, and the service chiefs alarmist about its interventionist implications. The new proposal evoked a similarly hostile reaction in Washington, where it was feared that the provisions regarding non-members might involve European action against the United States. The risk was negligible, but American hostility reinforced British and Canadian opposition. Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain’s rejection in March 1925, which he explained earlier to Lord Crewe, reflected the majority view:

A form of guarantee which is so general that we undertake exactly the same obligations in defence, shall I say of the Polish corridor (for which no British Government ever will or ever can risk the bones of a British grenadier) as we extend to those international arrangements or conditions on which, as our history shows, our national existence depends, is a guarantee so wide and so general that it carries no conviction whatever and gives no sense of security to those who are concerned in our action.9


It remains an open question whether the Geneva Protocol’s acceptance would have sufficiently reassured the security-seeking states, above all France, to allow progress towards disarmament. It is questionable whether the Protocol alone would have provided the certainty needed to make a collective security system viable. Even in a more limited system, created to meet an outside threat, there always remains an element of doubt as to whether member states will fulfil their obligations. In an inclusive system, where every state could be the aggressor or the victim of aggression and all are pledged to act, there was no way of assuring compliance. Much of the subsequent history of the disarmament talks was concerned with the differences between Britain and France and the question of priority, whether disarmament would lead to security or security precede disarmament. Britain was concerned, as at the peace conference, with European stability, still hoping to reduce European commitments in favour of its worldwide interests. As long as the ‘German problem’ remained on the agenda it had to play a major continental role. The continuing involvement in Europe did not mean, however, accepting an alliance on French terms or taking on added responsibilities through an extension of the League’s security functions. On the contrary, London sought to weaken the French links with its east European allies and would try to modify the Covenant’s security provisions. The French and their allies had everything to gain from a strengthened League committed to the support of the status quo. As constituted, the League did not provide the security that France required to reduce its military forces further than financial exigencies made necessary. As France remained, for the moment, the strongest military power in Europe, there could be no viable disarmament agreement without her. Using this powerful card, the French sought to gain through the League the backing from Britain that she had not yet won from London. More was at stake than the differing interests of land and maritime powers, though these, too, added to the difficulties of bridging the gap between the two most powerful European states. In the absence of any other comprehensive alternative, whatever its weaknesses, the Geneva Protocol would later be seen in Paris as the best means to enhance her security.

The security problem that had led MacDonald and Herriot to the Protocol would be settled in a different way at much less potential cost from the British point of view. Chamberlain, while globalist in his outlook, gave precedence to European affairs, and sought ‘special arrangements to meet special needs’.10 His March 1925 speech to

10 Richard S. Grayson, Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe: British Foreign Policy, 1924–29 (London, 1997), 55.
the League Council pointed to a regional arrangement guaranteeing the Franco-German borders. The somewhat cold and reserved British foreign secretary, unfairly judged as a political washout, helped to create the conditions for what was seen as a new chapter in European diplomacy. Some hoped that this and similar regional security guarantees might be the key that would open the way for general disarmament.

Books


HALL, CHRISTOPHER, *Britain, America and Arms Control, 1921–37* (Basingstoke, 1987).


**Other Specialized Books**


Articles


Yearwood, Peter J., ‘“Consistency with Honor”: Great Britain, the League of Nations, and the Corfu Crisis of 1923’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21 (1986).

**Theses**