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THE 'FAILURE' OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

By C. A. W. MANNING

It used at one time often to be said that the League's 'acid test' was disarmament. And even Clemenceau had lent some authority to the notion that the Allies were intending, if not bound, to disarm. The dependence of peace on disarmament was, moreover, one of the various beliefs to which a tribute of lip-service was accorded in the Covenant. The more peaceful the world became, the more likely, indeed, would be a spontaneous fall in the general level of armaments. A tranquil world, however, is one where a preponderance of power is with the states least under temptation to commit aggression and most concerned to prevent it. In this matter the League was in a sense its own enemy, for its association in the public mind with the ideal of disarmament may well have had something to do with that policy of uncovenanted retrenchment which was to leave Britain in a critical hour with the sensations, albeit possibly not the appearance, of a shorn lamb.

At bottom, disarmament was but a special case of the wider though less publicised problem of peaceful change. The League failed, according to Mr Sumner Welles, chiefly because 'it was never enabled to operate as its chief spokesman had intended, as an elastic and impartial instrument in bringing about peaceful and equitable adjustments between nations as time and circumstance proved necessary.'¹ What answer is there to this imputation from so distinguished a source? Is it enough to point, with Professor Rappard,² to the nature of those aims with which first Japan and then Italy resorted to violence, and to inquire by what conceivable process of institutionalised evolution Manchuria would ever have been detached from China or an end put to the Abyssinian State? Or should we not concede, on a deeper level of analysis, that the seeming indifference of the League system to claims even for 'equitable'

¹ *The Times*, 23 July 1941.

² *The Quest for Peace* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940) p. 176.

adjustments may have helped in some degree to install, or to confirm, in office, whether in Italy or Japan, the exponents of militaristic expansion? It would indeed be unwise to assume . . . that the 'adjustments' aspect of international organisation had been fully and fairly provided for in the 1919 scheme. This is not to assert that Article XIX must in all circumstances have proved wholly ineffectual or to ignore the still more constructive conception underlying Articles XI and XV. What is conceded is that . . . the intention of President Wilson . . . [needed] to be more widely and unreservedly shared than it was by his fellow-builders at Paris. What is not conceded is that the direct cause of the League's actual failure resided in its sluggishness in relation either to disarmament or to change in general. Before the instrument could be 'elastic' it must first have been strong; and, for reasons which it is proposed to examine, it was left weak from the start. Before the 'have-not' powers ever seriously began to smite upon the planks above, the 'haves', whether Allied or merely Associated, had too effectively loosed the props below.

So too as regards a special category of changes, namely, changes in the League system itself. Some people seemed to conceive the League system, not as a mere set of limited pledges, but as a programme of progressive integration, in which the birth of the Covenant figured as only a first beginning, a fingerpost, upon a road along which the several states, by joining the League, had in effect undertaken to march ever onward, virtually without a halt. For these people, the campaign for the concluding of additional agreements, amending or amplifying the Covenant, so far from being a movement for improving upon the League as a system, was in itself the very life of the League. It was as though the League were a bicycle, incapable of standing erect, and needing either to move on or to topple over. To such minds the reluctance of Britain, in particular, to add to the promises she had already given seemed not merely anti-social and obstructive, but in effect a form of disloyalty to the spirit of those promises themselves. The effect, however, of concentrating on the possibly hopeless task of getting the Covenant system bettered was not simply to divert part of the effort of the public-spirited from the work of making the nature of the existing institution widely understood; it may also, by implication, have conveyed to the undiscerning outsider the impression that the League, as it stood, was not looked upon as particularly efficacious. It may have been the less easy to win support for an organisation on which so many implied votes of no confidence were for ever being passed.

But there is yet another school. What if the bird-in-the-hand dating from 1919 were not a thing of flesh and blood at all, but simply a loose collection of feathers? In Mr Streit's case for federal union a salient passage is devoted to arguing that the League was in the nature of things unworkable through and through. The men of 1919, owing to some 'confusion due to various causes',³ had misconceived the problem of international government. They had 'enthroned the prewar principle' of sovereign statehood.⁴ Two remarks may be made here: the first is that the unworkableness argument is challenging but inconclusive; the second, that there is no reason to think that Larnaude, Smuts and the rest ever supposed themselves to be setting up a system of 'international government'. Their effort was rather directed, in the world as they found it, to creating such an international *organisation* as might have mitigated the inconveniences of the continued absence of anything in the nature of *government* in the society of sovereign states. Mr Streit's argument for federalism would be the stronger for not being partly dependent on such an unhistorical reinterpretation of the intentions of 1919.

Differences of judgement as to the causes of the League's failure are, indeed, rather commonly rooted, as here, in differences in the interpreting of what was in fact attempted with the inauguration of the League. There may even be some who, pointing to the achievements of the League's health organisation, or the beneficence of the mandates system, if not to the fruitful service of the International Labour Office, might wish to deny that the League as such had really failed at all. It may therefore be suitable to state here, quite briefly, what in this article is conceived to have been the essential nature of the League.

A characteristic of the Covenant is that, while it says very much, it says very much less than it seems to. Partly no doubt in a spirit of courtesy, partly because the League would need to attract as much sympathy as might be, the makers of the instrument gave a measure of satisfaction to each of several schools of progressive thought. The result was an institution which, if not all things to all men, did represent different things to different men. Relatively few liked it greatly for what it was. The many who cared for it mostly did so for what they judged it able to become. But as a set of new commitments its scope was in fact rather modest. The round-table habit had long been familiar in power diplomacy. No nation, in the actual letter of the Covenant, promised to disarm,

³ *Union Now* (London: Cape, 1939) p. 170.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

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b" (or to accept arbitration, or to concur in peaceful change. The Covenant in reality consists of little except Articles X and XVI (enshrining the coercion principle) plus some embroidery. Woodrow Wilson regarded the collective security plan as the heart of the document, and in this, it is submitted, he was right. Despite the hopeful propaganda of those who have disliked, or have wanted the sympathy of those who disliked, the philosophy of sanctions, it is in essence an agreement, not merely to talk together, but to act together, for the preservation or restoration of peace. The League could thus be fairly described as a 'collective security club' for sovereign states; and it was as such that it failed.

It is necessary to resist the temptation to include at this stage a recapitulation of all the outstanding events in the history of the League. The barest outline must suffice.

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The conception of the League as essentially a security system had already received unequivocal expression in that report, by the Phillimore Committee, upon which the Covenant was to be principally based. There was in those days no vagueness as to the need for drastic and immediate action, or the prospect of it, as the one relatively reliable way of deterring the would-be aggressor. 'Unanimous and automatic', and 'without waiting for the others', are phrases from the Phillimore Report;⁵ and Wilson expressly envisaged the use of such military force as might be needed to bring the aggressor to a standstill. During the peace negotiations, however, the idea was in two important respects watered down. In deference to the Scandinavians there would after all be no explicit promise to use military force. In deference to Mr Hunter Miller, an expert on the American Constitution, it was provided that the *casus foederis*, instead of inducing *ipso facto* a state of war between the aggressor and the other members of the League, should merely impose on the latter an obligation to treat the former in certain specified ways, as having committed 'an act of war' against them. Was this unrealistic? Not necessarily, seeing that the United States was assumed to be a prospective member, and that a blockade such as the British and American fleets had jointly applied against Germany in 1917-18 was to be 'immediately' put on against the state resorting to war. It was to be a different matter when, by a minority of votes, the American Senate had thrown out the Treaty. Yet, as Professor Rappard puts it, in spite of the indisposition of the composer, who was himself to have conducted, 'the Geneva concert was not called off'.⁶

⁵ D. Hunter Miller, *The Drafting of the Covenant* (New York, 1928) I 5.

⁶ *The Quest for Peace*, p. 136.

Meanwhile the French, in particular, had from the first made it plain that they placed more reliance on old-style alliances than on the collective security offered by the Covenant. And, whereas in Paris Lord Robert Cecil had commented that Article X meant war if it meant anything, British diplomacy now tended more and more to represent the principle of round-table consultation as being, for it, the essence of the League. Then, the 1921 Assembly, anxious to reassure those whom Professor Rappard calls the 'debtors' of security, put upon Article XVI a set of what came to be called 'interpretations' which, as he expresses it, were at least as reassuring to any prospective aggressor.⁷

When in 1921 a timely mention of Article XVI did help to check a Yugoslav advance into Albania, the British, so far from pointing the moral of this meaningful event, allowed it to seem as if their allusion to certain possibilities had been due to a slip: and when in 1923 Italy seized Corfu, the Greek Government, doubtless advisedly, deemed it best to 'give Italy the benefit of such doubt as may exist as to the character of her act'. Greece, in 1925, was in her turn effectively restrained, but she after all was not a great power.

That year the British had given their blessing to the doctrine that, where for historical reasons war was a readily conceivable contingency, states would do well to negotiate some 'special arrangement' to meet the 'special need'. Locarno was presented as an example to be emulated. Exposed states not in enjoyment of any such supplementary 'arrangement' were by implication recognised as being imperfectly safeguarded. For others, if not for them, there was some consolation in the prospect that if, in an obviously difficult case the Covenant system proved inadequate, fair-minded observers would presumably be disposed to make allowance. The Chaco, and still more the Manchurian, affairs were indeed sufficiently difficult, and hopes still flickered that, if tested in Europe – playing, so to say, on the 'home' ground – the League might yet find its form. Abyssinia was not indeed in Europe; but Italy was. Hers was thus a real test case – a fair test both positively and negatively for the League, though it was never made into a fair test of the full possibilities of collective action.

Negatively, it could be seen that the failure of sanctions was due neither to the vagueness of the Covenant's criterion of aggression, nor to the 'gap' for 'legitimate' war, nor to the optional character of arbitration, nor to the unanimity rule. The aggressor identified

⁷ Ibid., p. 237.

himself with ostentatious precision. And, though a few member states fell victim to such a paralysis of diplomatic vision as entailed their dissent from the common finding that the *casus foederis* had occurred, the sanctions-front got together, and quickly, notwithstanding.

It is hardly sufficient to explain that sanctions failed because tried in an incomplete form and on a frankly advertised footing of limited liability, construed as meaning limited risks. The question is, why was that done?

Mr Leonard Woolf has in effect suggested an answer. 'The League failed', he declares, 'because the psychology of co-operation was weak or absent.'⁸ His thesis is broadly that the problem of getting states to live together without war is not obviously different in nature from that of getting passengers to queue up at bus-stops.⁹ It is a question of progressing from 'the psychology of conflict' to 'the psychology of co-operation and law'. The League presupposed an in fact too largely non-existent 'sense of community and common interest'. To this we shall return. But first a glance at some other of the League's reputed presuppositions.

It seems well established that, in Woodrow Wilson's conception of the League, its member states would, in general, be parliamentary democracies on a more or less standardised model. Even of those original members, however, whose constitutions could at the outset have passed as democratic, some proceeded presently to adopt other forms. Is this perhaps a sufficient key to the League's eventual non-success?

Whether because totalitarian states incline to be expansionist or because dynamic communities tend to become totalitarian, it might seem at first sight as though contentment with the *status quo* were to be looked for only in countries democratically run. Portugal, on the one hand, and Eire, on the other, may, it is true, be cited as exceptions to this idea. Wilson, however, is perhaps unlikely to have been thinking along such lines when postulating a League of democratic peoples. His vision was rather of mankind in the mass, liberal, co-operative, peace-loving and yearning for a better order which it was somehow the urge of governments as such to postpone. He does not seem to have thought in terms of the interests and preoccupations of states, as distinct from peoples. He incidentally seems to have believed in 'world' opinion no less than in the public opinion of a particular people. And he does not seem to have given the governments, as distinct from their peoples, credit for

⁸ *The War for Peace* (London: Routledge, 1940) p. 201.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

the good will or the good sense necessary to their resolute support of the League.

In so far as Wilson's preference for democracies may have been grounded in a belief that they would be too pacific, if not too conscientious, to make war against the Geneva system, it may well have been wise; but what he apparently failed to foresee was that the democracies might be found too pacific, and not conscientious enough, to make war in its defence. It was a democracy which, in exercise, to be sure of its undoubted right, struck the first big blow at the Geneva experiment; some other democracies have been among the least eager of member states to assume new sanctionist obligations; and it is only necessary to mention that delicate subject, the 1934-5 Peace Ballot, to recall how imperfectly the British democracy had in fourteen years taken stock of the implications of Britain's position as a member of the League. The failure of 1935 can no doubt be ascribed to the wickedness of certain wicked men, just as the collapse of a dam may be due to the weight of water. But the Covenant had accepted the fact of human wickedness. The failure was surely in part a failure of certain democracies. Would Wilson have explained that it was not simply for their proved virtues but for their assumed amenability to future education that he liked the democratic peoples? If the democracies did indeed fail the League, would it, in his view, have been because someone had failed the democracies? How did he envisage the process by which they were to come by the necessary grasp of the 'strategy' of the League security system and the scope of their commitments in its behalf? Would their governments, having *ex hypothesi* placed their peoples under the said obligations, proceed thereafter, by ministerial speeches or otherwise, to get the details straight in the popular mind? Or would that, in the President's view, have been more properly the task of non-official bodies, such as the League of Nations Union in England?

In so far as its founders can have supposed that the governments represented at Geneva would, in their foreign policy, be controlled by a vocal home opinion watchful of the League's true interests and scrupulous in regard to national obligations, their anticipations would seem to have been unfulfilled. In Britain, for example, the League of Nations Union, though fertile of advice to Ministers as to the possible bearing of Britain's League relationships on day-to-day issues of policy, and though assuming to speak in the name of a large subscribing membership, probably never quite established, in the sight of the electorate as a whole, a title to pronounce, from the standpoint of practical politics, on the merits of

what Government or Opposition leaders were proposing should be done. Either the general public in Britain was not alive to its need of such a mentor, or else it was not fully persuaded of the Union's fitness to fill the role. In France the corresponding organisation seems to have been even less capable of dictating national policy.

As for the Wilsonian concept of an organised world opinion: one would be glad of a diagrammatic representation of the channels along which the Covenant should be read as expecting it to exercise its salutary sway. One's first vision is of a recalcitrant government bowing, in Geneva, to a sort of huge auditorium labelled 'Mankind'. But, it being recalled that democratic governments – and they were expected to be democratic – should be directly responsive firstly to public opinion at home, the picture becomes inverted. Public opinion in the recalcitrant country bows before an assemblage of governments in Geneva. The idea might seem to be that there is, on the one hand, a factor called world opinion, whose relations with the League Council are such that what world opinion thinks the Council will say, and what the Council has said world opinion will think. Then, there is public opinion in the recalcitrant state, which, though not directly sensitive to the views of the Council, is sensitive to the views of the world. The sequence thus becomes: Council investigation, Council report, endorsement by world opinion, shock for home opinion in recalcitrant country, domestic pressure upon recalcitrant government, capitulation of recalcitrant government.

That world opinion, if there be such a factor, did in practice have little directive influence on the League's proceedings will probably not be contested.

In *International Conciliation*, No. 363, on 'Causes of the Peace Failure', part of the blame for the breakdown is laid on that 'inertia and fatigue' which are described as having beset in the League's crucial years those democracies in whose hands much of the power of taking far-reaching decisions at that time lay. 'The tendency to postpone action', the statement runs, 'is even more clearly marked in a democracy than in an autocracy.'¹⁰ It would probably be a mistake, in assessing the causes of the League's failure, to leave wholly on one side the question of possible defects in the mechanism of the democratic control of foreign policy. If it be true that in postponing rearmament Mr Baldwin was bowing to what he took to be popular preferences, and if it be true that his action or inaction in so doing was in accord with an accepted theory of parliamentary government, then the unpreparedness of

¹⁰ P. 342.

Britain at a critical time was *pro tanto* attributable to the normal functioning of democracy. Given that in Britain at least the public are unlikely to waive altogether their general control of the government's doings on the international plane, it is plainly desirable that those who instruct the public in the essentials of international politics should be both competent and disinterested. So far at least as League questions were concerned, that popular enlightenment was a virtual monopoly of the League of Nations Union. How was the task performed?

If it be proper to record here a purely personal impression, it was perhaps a little unfortunate that the Union should not have been content to put both hands to the same plough. On its strictly educational side, that is to say, in acquainting the people with the nature of the existing League, the character of that international environment into which it had been born, and the implications of Britain's place in both, it needed, and might well have deserved, the sympathy of as many significant circles and personalities as possible. A national institution, meeting a national need, it might have aspired to a truly national status. Its other side, however, on which it sought, so to say, to serve as a corrective to the Foreign Office, supplying His Majesty's Government with a more detached appreciation of its responsibilities than could be looked for from those accustomed to relating policy more immediately to national interests, seemed somehow to bring it into the 'bad books' of many quite moderate men. Even some responsible statesmen may have been not wholly unaffected, in their fixations on the subject of Geneva and all it stood for, by a sense of discomfort left by some encounter with Grosvenor Crescent.

And, if it be true that, as Sir Arthur Salter has put it, the sanctions policy against Italy, applied with mental reservations regarding the risk of war, was 'plain lunacy';¹¹ if it be also true that, but for the Peace Ballot, that policy might not in those circumstances have been adopted; if, as was with a certain plausibility claimed at the time, the then Government was led, in so vital a matter, to go counter to its own 'better' judgement – it seems doubtful if the method then chosen for ensuring that the popular will should prevail was necessarily preferable to the time-honoured practice of parliamentary criticism and debate. Given that some of the data on which governments have to base their decisions must of necessity remain secret, there is plainly something to be said for that alternative theory of democratic usage which would leave much of the detail of foreign affairs, especially in their strategic

¹¹ *The Future of the League of Nations* (London: Oxford U.P., 1936) p. 66.

aspects, to the unharassed discretion of those who on their general qualifications are able to retain for the time being the confidence of the House of Commons.

Can we systematically analyse, can we so much as introduce a discussion of, the circumstances of the League's eventual failure without pausing over this point of political technique?

For its success, it has been said, the League postulated a 'new international morality', 'a new spirit in the whole field of international politics'.¹² It seems difficult to give any precise meaning

to these collocations of words. In a numerous society the notion of a prevalent standard of ethical behaviour does appear to have some validity: but where the conduct in question is that of so select a

company as the family of nations today, it seems more apposite to speak of the respective standards of the several states than of a single standard conceived as common to the international community as a whole. It is moreover chiefly the doings of the yet more

restricted group of the great powers that have relevance in the present context, and even within this lesser circle each member

has evidently its own traditions, moral prejudices and ideals. In so far as the acts and abstentions of a given power are ever conditioned by the ideas current among its people as to what is decent,

right and proper internationally, those ideas are apt themselves to be affected by the situation in which the particular country finds itself at any particular time. The theory about its demanding a 'new

morality' thus seems to amount to little more than saying that, if the League was to flourish, support for it must have become a feature of the foreign policy of its most influential member states.

If the system did indeed presuppose in the world a morality so improved as to cause the peoples to act altruistically, it was surely predestined to fail. The tendency of some of its admirers to talk

in terms of such a 'moral' revolution may have helped to inspire that widespread scepticism which was so baffling to those with exact ideas as to the value and reasonableness of the League. As material

for the edifice of peace, it has been wisely observed, we had better be content to rely on the 'self-interest of incorrigibly nationalistic states'.¹³ The decisions of responsible statesmen are never in fact

derived by deduction from an abstract principle such as human brotherhood, world solidarity or even universal free trade; they can no more be based on idealism alone than they can on individual

caprice. A nation's course is conditioned by many elements more

¹² Zimmern, *The League of Nations and the Rule of Law* (London: Macmillan, 1936) p. 285.

¹³ *The Future of the League of Nations*, p. 24.

earthy and old-established than any supposedly common criterion of international ethics. If the League was to succeed it must do so in spite of the nature of men, the nature of states and the nature of the society of states. There needed to be no question of introducing for the first time the idea of an international loyalty. What was wanted of France in 1935 was merely the substitution of one loyalty for another; loyalty to her new-found 'friendship' with Italy was not, in Laval's eyes, inconsistent with the sovereignty of France.

The point about incorrigible nationalism has, however, some sobering implications. In showing why social cohesion cannot in his view be looked for among a community whose units are not individuals but states, Mr Streit insists that 'the change of unit . . . makes all the difference in the world'.¹⁴ To this extent at least he seems to be right, namely, that some of the motives which predispose the individual to defer to social control are absent in the case of the sovereign state, as indeed of the trade union, industrial combine, or other organised interest-group active in the domestic field. More pertinent, therefore, in the circumstances, than affirmations about international morality are the doubts some sceptics have uttered regarding the effectiveness of international law. An instance of this scepticism may be seen in the federalists' distrust of 'compact' as a basis for supranational integration. Talk of the sanctity of treatise and the binding force of international law may, they will possibly admit, mean something, but it does not mean that an international promise will in fact be fulfilled.

Though we have other explanations enough of the League's regretted failure we can hardly dismiss out of hand this doctrine of the fragility of international legal ties. There does seem to be ground for the belief that some countries pay less heed nowadays than they are supposed once upon a time to have done to the prescriptions and prohibitions of international law. During the First World War we heard rather more about fighting to restore the sanctity of treaties than we are hearing now. Assuming that treaties had indeed been more sacred in the good old days, it does seem that the effort to restore their erstwhile sanctity was last time an incomplete success. The state which abides by its international duty, though it were to its own hindrance, seems today rather exceptional. There is room for serious thinking on the limits of what can in these times be effectively done to control in advance the behaviour of sovereign states by getting them pledged to do what when the day comes they may not want to do. It is not sufficient to share the vulgar superstition which ascribes to sovereign states, as such, a

¹⁴ *Union Now*, p. 199.

sort of absolute right to violate their treaty obligations. Sovereignty, whatever else it may amount to, does not, let us admit, mean that.

Even the individual citizen, however, is likely to revolt against some sorts of legislative prohibition. The zest with which the signatures of plenipotentiaries were wont to be solicited at Geneva (half the business there was ultimately of this character) did seem to argue a rather remarkable disposition to trust in the compulsive potency of international legal ties. It may be that the most solid contribution a government could make towards restoring the sanctity of treaties would be to avoid and discourage the inclusion in them of provisions the full observance of which is politically unlikely.

Governments have not, indeed, ceased to assume, in their mutual intercourse, the existence of international law and its validity for them. It is unnecessary to speculate here as to the theory on which they may do so. Enough to say that they presumably do it on a theory of some sort, and that for practical purposes it need make no great difference if the theory in question should happen to be a fiction. Diplomacy, in short, proceeds to all intents as though the states had said to one another, 'Let's pretend that there exists such a thing as international law, binding upon us in our mutual dealings in virtually the same sort of sense as municipal law is binding on individual citizens of an ordered national community in their relations *inter se*.'

The truth seems to be that the binding quality of international obligation is an inherited dogma conventionally kept alive by the states for reasons rather of utility than of ethics, religion or imaginative mysticism. There results a sort of game, in which the players, while exacting as much flesh as they can out of every pound they are promised, value as a diplomatic asset such reputation as they can establish for punctilio in the discharge of what is due from them. The theory on which Britain, for instance, commonly abides by a pledge, is not so much *Pacta sunt servanda*, as *Pacta Britannica semper sunt servata*. 'I am not prepared to be the first British Foreign Secretary', declared Mr Eden, 'to go back on a British signature.'¹⁵ Even Hitler, we may assume, had Germany any sort of reputation, might be anxious to preserve it. Anxious, but not over-anxious. It is easy to see why legal obligations, while they have a certain compulsive potency, as affecting the action of states, can never in themselves have very much.

No one who witnessed the efforts, throughout the Geneva hey-day, to get Britain, in particular, to sign something more, can have

¹⁵ *The Times*, 6 Dec 1939.

been insensible of the significance still seemingly attached to the metaphysical *vinculum* of a formally valid stipulation. For the vitality of the League there were needed, however, to supplement the persuasive influence of the legal nexus, two independent elements, namely, a policy of co-operation on the part of the associated governments, and a psychology of co-operation among the populations under their rule.

'All thinking on the problem of world organisation', complained Mr Streit, 'still seems to centre on the League method.'¹⁶ That is perhaps less true today than when it was said. Yet the fact seems to be that, whatever progress in the founding of federal structures the coming years may see, there will remain, as between units not yet federated, a possibility of conflict of which some sort of League-like relationship would appear to be the one readily thinkable mitigation.

We only 'court disaster', as Lord Halifax said in December 1936, 'if we forget that no paper plan will endure if it does not freely spring from the will of the peoples, who alone can give it vigour and life. International, like our own national institutions must be very deeply anchored in reality. We must build our Utopia on foundations which themselves will be well laid and solid.'¹⁷

Professor MacIver has taught us to think of domestic stability in terms of a prerequisite 'will for the state'.¹⁸ It would perhaps be helpful if we could accustom ourselves to thinking of the possible vitality of a collective security system as presupposing a 'will for' the success of the given form of collective security club. *Whose* will? For its effective and reliable functioning any system of collective security will indeed depend, in the *second* place, on what Mr Woolf calls the 'psychology of co-operation', as a quality of the associated peoples; but, in the *first* place, it will depend on what may be differentiated as the *policy* of co-operation, soberly decided upon by the statesmen by whom those peoples are led.

Given a form of international organisation which it would be in the unmistakable interest of the democracies to support, there would be a need for publicity in regard to it, which must avoid the spiritual confusion that must follow if its content were dogmatically unsound. What the League postulated was not a cosmopolitanism like that of Mr H. G. Wells, but a sane internationalism grounded in an accurate sense of the place of the given country as a unit in international society and an appreciation of just how much and

¹⁶ *Union Now*, p. 165.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 27 March 1936.

¹⁸ *The Modern State* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926) *passim*.

how little the scheme of the new organisation required of the participating states. With an international 'constitution', as with a national system of law and order, a congenial ideological climate is a necessity. Only when the public had been made conversant with the theory of the new international order could the appropriate attitude towards it have been effectively fostered among them. So long as well-intentioned teachers encouraged their disciples to see it as the overt aim, if not the actual achievement, of the League to supersede, not safeguard, sovereignty, it was rash to expect from the British layman any nice appreciation of the responsibilities of Britain as one of the leading members of the club.

But while it was evidently desirable that the masses should have become intelligently well disposed towards it, it was indispensable, for the League's success, that the governments should, on a hard-headed assessment of national interest, have judged that it was worthy of their active support. 'Loyalty' of the kind here relevant is not an unsophisticated sentiment; it is a diplomatic orientation, to be looked for only in governments conscious of their countries' concern in the setting of a particular kind of precedent. And what determines a government's policy is its own estimate of national interest, not the estimate made by the foreigner, by the doctrinaire internationalist, or by the detached historian. Was it, however, mere wishful thinking that pictured an international 'set-up' to which governments that mattered could give the same sort of general loyalty as the people of a civilised country give to its constitution?

Co-operation by governments does not come about, and is not determined upon, in the abstract; but on the basis of a particular programme. It was necessary, therefore, to devise a formula of co-operation that could be genuinely acceptable to and freely accepted by as many of the leading powers as possible. And this again would not depend merely on the content of the programme, but partly also on the historic setting in which it was proposed. There was needed such a settlement as the generality of strong states would be predisposed to defend, a settlement bearing, therefore, some relation to the probable pattern of effective strength in the times ahead. To imagine an extreme case: suppose one of the victors were to insist on monopolising all the fruits of victory; could the others then be counted upon to defend that result? A position is unlikely to occur in which all states are fully satisfied with the map. Were all so satisfied, collective security might be superfluous, just as, were none of them satisfied, it would be a plain impossibility. But, given a *status quo* with which enough of the great powers could remain content, and which they were disposed actively to uphold, the

plight of any still dissatisfied minority might be as relatively helpless as was that of Hungary in the period between the wars.

There are several conceivable systems of international organisation. As it was, the League system, in the post-1919 setting, had too few natural friends and, of those which it had, not enough were prepared to stand up for the club. Sovereign states are not like zealous sportsmen putting their entire personality into a game. Rather they are like grown-ups, who while half-joining in the children's games get on with their knitting and reminiscences as they go. And, unlike men, states have the chameleon's aptitude for keeping an eye on more than one object at a time. If the grown-ups have been drawn only with difficulty into the game their attention is all the more likely to be divided.

Now it is known that Woodrow Wilson attached prime importance to getting the Covenant into that Peace Treaty which certain statesmen were so eager to sign. Why? Because he was far from assured that the governments of some of the prospective member countries, were their choice in the matter entirely free, would apprehend as he did the benefit that their countries must draw from membership in the club. For an understanding of the spirit in which some of those countries took their membership in the League's formative period, it is useful to recall that, in a sense, they were conscript members rather than volunteers; and that, with the United States dropping out, they had found themselves involved in a game other than even that for which they had been so astutely enrolled. Small wonder if their acceptance of the system was tentative, partial and hedged about with tacit reserves. So far from enjoying the sustenance of a thoroughly representative 'will for . . .', the collective security club would be left dependent on getting the sufficiently resolute backing of two disconcerted players, Britain and France. What sort of figure did these particular countries cut when they appeared at Geneva? Did they look as if they intended serious business? Did they look as if they themselves had faith that the system would work according to what was still its official plan?

Actually it is more than doubtful if certain leaders of French and British public life at that time were well satisfied as to either the inherent practicability of the experiment or its value to their peoples. Support for or tolerance of the League had to be grafted on to an outlook on international politics which had its bases in the pre-League past and had not of a sudden been transmuted with the appearance of the new factor on the scene. Presentable idealists might be sent to sit, and orate, in the Council or Assembly. But those

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international 'persons' France and Britain had other fish to fry, other sections in their Ministries than those concerned with League affairs. What mattered, after all, was not that certain countries had signed 'on the dotted line', but what they would do *le cas échéant*. The occasion of Italy's seizure of Corfu was at least as momentous in the League's history as was that of the ratification of the Treaty. Had Britain and France elected to treat that as a test case of substantial, whether or not technical, aggression, need we doubt that the other League states would have joined them in setting a precedent which, besides having its effect upon other potential disturbers of the peace, must have done more to exercise the scepticism of realists and reactionaries at home than all the best-documented exposés of the propaganda agencies? That scepticism, never wholly unreasoning, was now given the confirmation of experience.

Though French and British statesmen were willing to keep the League going for what in better times it might become, not for one moment must their vigilance be diverted from 'public pre-occupation no. 1', namely, relations with Germany, as a source of possible reparations, and of possible trouble.

Looking back, it is easy to see that, deprived of American membership, the League was likely to survive only if the European atmosphere became and remained such as to put little or no strain on its collective-security framework. Collective security was, after all, only the negative side of the preparation of peace. As a positive programme, peace required the willing co-operation of at least the principal countries of Europe, and in particular the co-operation of Germany. Either statesmen might have despaired altogether of an enduring peace, and concentrated on holding Germany down, thereby to postpone the day of reckoning; or they might have staked something on the chance that the liberal element – for there was believed to be such an element – might, if fully supported from abroad, establish a real control of German foreign policy. Neither of these lines was effectively followed. British opinion by the time of the Ruhr invasion had come round to something like genuine sympathy with the Germans. But when, in the crucial days of 1919, Clemenceau had set his face against having Germany as an original member of the League, neither Wilson nor Lloyd George had judged it vital to oppose him. Yet, if their professions were any index of their attitude, Germany's 'Weimar' leaders might have been expected to enter upon a course of co-operation with at least as much sincerity as some other governments of the time.

It is doubtless impossible to say whether German liberalism would in the long run have remained able to resist the pressure of

the extreme nationalist section; but, as it was, that blindness of heart which, after Wilson had insisted on having a democratic Germany to make peace with, proceeded to treat its representatives as in effect the authors of the war, robbed the none too robust Geneva infant of perhaps its best remaining chance of becoming a sturdy child. The moral case for making a pariah of the beaten enemy may have been overwhelming: that was a matter of opinion. But, if the ex-Allies were, in time, to have Germany's whole-hearted co-operation, they needed to invite that co-operation in time. When, years later, the 'fulfilment' Government represented by Stresemann accepted membership of the League, there was already a somewhat different Germany.

If, as may well have been the case, no French Government – possibly no British Government either – could in 1919 have taken the German protestations of internationalist good will at their face value, this point is one for consideration along with the other limitations of democracy.

It may be objected that it was Italy, not Germany, that smashed the collective system, such as it was. Superficially this is true. But it was the German menace that in 1935 governed the attitude of France. It was Hitler who, before moving a man into the Rhineland, showed up the collective system, and so, to all intents, put an end to the League.

Still Italy, too, did have a hand in it, a bigger hand than she is allowed to have today. She too lacked the necessary 'will for . . .'. Though neither beaten in the war nor excluded from original membership, she had failed to develop much affection for Geneva. Stability in the domestic realm is said partly to depend on a stake in the established order being given to the numerous and weak. Internationally, it is relatively more important to make certain of the strong. Wilson cared not greatly for the strong: hence his assent to a settlement which, while suiting the weak and numerous, was felt as humiliating by some of the near-great few. So Italy came out as a protagonist of change. Her first move in the matter related, innocently enough, to a topic now featured in the Atlantic Charter, namely, access to raw materials. Her then pre-Fascist rulers sustained a rebuff.¹⁹ And thereafter, if neutral opinion had asked of a prospective aggressor, 'Why not invoke the pacific procedures?' it might always with some plausibility have been answered, 'What would be the use of that?' And, on the other hand, aggression might still be found to pay.

¹⁹ Council Minutes, Xth session, pp. 31, 216–25; 1st Assembly, IIInd Committee, pp. 125, 133, 220, and Plenary Meetings, pp. 312, 365, 366.

To get the collective sanctions in perspective it is well to put oneself imaginatively in the shoes of the international felon at the moment when he is maturing his nefarious little plans. What is wanted, to deter him, is the strong presumption that his enterprise will be countered by the firm intervention of enough great powers. It is already something if he be unable to depend on other powers to 'stand idly by'. The common view that he will always find friends may, indeed, be more justly put as a belief that, except he have the assurance of enough moral support, the would-be aggressor is unlikely to march. And the question he asks himself is not 'What will they say in Geneva?' but 'What will they do in London, Paris – and Washington, D.C.?' The inner logic of Article XVI is that, given the likelihood that it would be fully observed, the case will hardly arise. And conversely, given the probability that it will be executed in a courteous and considerate manner, the chance of its being tested becomes almost a certainty. The Duce, it is true, had nothing more to go on than the character, and intentions, of Pierre Laval. But these he seems to have known.

Whatever the Phillimore Committee, not to mention Article XVI itself, may have envisaged, the doctrine had long become current that the use of sanctions by member states would be co-operative and co-ordinated rather than individualistic. So perhaps in a given case the British could in conscience be excused for 'keeping stations' with the French.²⁰ And the French? Why, in 1935, did they not show greater zeal for the setting of a precedent for the operation of Article XVI? When Laval made his bargain in Rome, German rearmament was still in its earlier, undemonstrative phase. Might France not have hazarded something for the sake of checking an aggressor? Sundry explanations exist – mostly matters of surmise. But one question comes first: 'How real, as judged by France, was her interest in the setting of that precedent?' In and out of season she had argued that the bare Covenant was not a workable security plan. Its successful action would have knocked the substance out of much that she had said. Moreover, of the states whose 'collective' support she might have looked for under the League system, a number were independently pledged to give her solid aid in the only case that mattered. Cynically viewed, France's interest in seeing an unsupplemented Article XVI stand a successful trial may have seemed slight as compared with her interest in keeping her several allies – Italy not least – at their posts.

²⁰ 'If risks for peace are to be run', said Sir Samuel Hoare, 'they must be run by all.' 'The League stands', he went on, with studied deliberation, 'for steady and collective resistance.' (16th Assembly, Plenary Meetings, pp. 44, 46.)

• As for Britain, what was called in question by its opponents at the general election was not her Government's insistently collectivist sanctions programme, but their sincerity in putting it forward. Englishmen wanted to save Abyssinia – and the League – and their national self-esteem. Was it ever in their power to save all three? And is it altogether certain that the electorate ever in its heart dissented from the French compromise solution, of giving Abyssinia *some* aid short of war? What many Englishmen had all along feared was that they might not be able finally to consolidate the Geneva system without first having to bear the main brunt of a general war. The irony of it is that they . . . [became] involved in such a war, but without thereby making any decisive contribution to the consolidation of the Geneva system.

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