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## The League of Nations and the United Nations

By Charles Townshend

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The imposition of a peaceful world order was a key objective for the League of Nations, established in the aftermath of World War One. How can its successor, the United Nations, react to the challenges of the 21st century? Charles Townshend assesses its chances.

### The birth of the League ideal

The League of Nations, born of the destruction and disillusionment arising from World War One, was the most ambitious attempt that had ever been made to construct a peaceful global order. It was rooted in a comprehensive liberal critique of the pre-war international system, which was widely believed to have been the cause of the carnage of 1914-18.

#### The secret diplomacy of the old order would be replaced by...open discussion

The idea of the League was to eliminate four fatal flaws of the old European states: in place of competing monarchical empires - of which the Hapsburg Empire was perhaps the most notorious - the principle of national self-determination would create a world of independent nation states, free of outside interference; the secret diplomacy of the old order would be replaced by the open discussion and resolution of disputes; the military alliance blocs would be replaced by a system of collective guarantees of security; and agreed disarmament would prevent the recurrence of the kind of arms race that had racked up international tensions in the pre-war decade.

Before this, the closest approach to an international political structure had been the Congress System, in which the European great powers held occasional summit meetings to discuss issues they found urgent. (To his credit, the much-maligned Tsar Nicholas II of Russia had sponsored international efforts to ban 'inhumane' weapons such as expanding or exploding bullets; but these efforts were only partially successful.)

The surviving victorious great powers at the end of the Great War - Britain and France - would have preferred to go no further than regularising the old Congress System. The spirit of the times, however, which was overbearingly personified in the president of the USA, Woodrow Wilson, pushed towards the creation of a more comprehensive global organisation, which would include all independent states, and in which even the smallest state would have a voice.

### The growth of a system

Unfortunately, Wilson's thinking about the way that self-determination would work in the real world, and about getting his idea for a 'community of power' off the ground, remained vague. Partly this was to avoid alarming US isolationist opinion, but in any case, when the League Covenant was agreed at the Paris peace conference in 1919, the US Senate refused to ratify it.



President Wilson; America failed to ratify the League Covenant ©

How the League would have worked with American participation remains one of the great 'what ifs' of modern history. As it was, the direction of the system was left in the hands of states - primarily Britain and France - whose altruism was questionable and whose economic resources had been crippled by the war.

#### There was a widespread belief...that the League's prestige was growing incrementally

Yet the League of Nations did work surprisingly well, at least for a decade after the war. By December 1920, 48 states had signed the League Covenant, pledging to work together to eliminate aggression between countries. A series of disputes - between Germany and Poland over Upper Silesia, between Italy and Greece, and between Greece and Bulgaria - were resolved under its auspices.

Though relatively minor, these were just the kind of incidents that had in the past triggered regional conflicts - and indeed World War One itself. There was a widespread belief, or hope, that the League's prestige was growing incrementally. Methods of investigating disputes, and helping to keep the peace, were regularised.

Another crucial function was the establishment of Mandates to bring all the territories that had been liberated from German and Turkish rule, at the end of the Great War, to eventual self-determination. In Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, the process seemed to be moving steadily forward. (In view of its subsequent

history, the formal admission of Iraq to the League in 1933 was indeed premature.) The machinery of the League organisation grew more substantial, and the secretariat began to carve out the basis for a quasi-independent role, although this was unplanned and unlooked-for by the old great powers.

### **...any credible system of economic sanctions was far distant**

The proliferation of League activity, however, carried risks: as one of its founders, Lloyd George, put it, 'it had weak links spreading everywhere and no grip anywhere'. 'Grip' ultimately meant the capacity to use force. When the crucial concept of collective security was put to the acid test in the 1930s, it dissolved. Once big powers started to challenge the status quo, as Japan did in Manchuria, the League found it practically impossible to reach a clear verdict on who was guilty of 'aggression'.

Or, still more disastrously, in the case of Italian pressure on Abyssinia, the guilt was clear enough but the key powers, Britain and France, were unwilling to antagonise the guilty party because of their wider strategic fears. The failed attempt to impose an oil embargo on Italy demonstrated that any credible system of economic sanctions was far distant.

## **Death and transfiguration?**

Like the proverbial old soldier, the League never died, but rather faded away. Between the humiliation of seeing one of its members, Austria, taken over by Germany in 1938 without even a formal protest, and the absurdity of expelling the USSR after the outbreak of World War Two in 1939 (an event that neither the USSR nor the League were involved in), all that remained were such wraithlike undertakings as the British Mandate in Palestine.

When the Allies finally began to prepare for the end of World War Two, they rejected any idea of restoring the League, and instead moved to establish a new organisation, the United Nations (UN). The structure of the United Nations was to give a much stronger position to the traditional great powers through the UN Security Council; the most significant thing about its creation, perhaps, is that this time the USA did not back away.



Displaying the UN flag, New York, 1949 ©

### **The UN may have almost stumbled sideways into its peacekeeping role.**

A significant number of the old League's aims and methods were transmitted into the new organisation in 1945. Among these were not only such low-key but effective institutions as the International Court and the International Labour Organisation, but also the working assumptions of the secretariat, and some key operations - including those that would soon come to be called 'peacekeeping' operations.

The UN may have almost stumbled sideways into its peacekeeping role, but the motive and sustaining force in the process was the survival - and the strengthening - of the expectation of international involvement in the preservation of global security. Gradually this came to include the defence of human rights as well as the resolution of territorial conflict. The UN's first attempt to resolve a serious conflict, in Palestine in 1947-8, was unsuccessful, even disastrous: it failed to implement its own partition plan, and its special mediator was assassinated.

### **Dealing with such internal conflict was a far more ambitious...task**

None-the-less, UNTSO (the UN Truce Supervision Organisation) opened the gates to a wave of - often bafflingly labelled - successors: UNMOGIP, UNEF, UNOGIL, UNFICYP, UNIMOG, ONUMOZ, UNPROFOR. Some, like the observer force in Kashmir, have remained active for 50 years: not evidence of brilliant success, admittedly, but evidence of hard necessity and a degree of usefulness at least.

Other UN organisations had a shorter but more spectacular life: notably the Operation in the Congo (ONUC) from 1960 to 1964, which prefigured the alarming future for missions to states that were dissolving into civil war. In the Congo, the UN found itself using military force against Katangan rebels to preserve the unity of the state of Congo - a departure from the principle of strict neutrality which has usually been thought vital to the success of its peacekeeping missions.

Dealing with such internal conflict was a far more ambitious and demanding task than the traditional role of assisting consenting states to observe ceasefires. In effect it showed that the UN might need to take governmental responsibility in some situations.

## **A new international age?**

The development towards taking responsibility in countries at risk of disintegration, was due to a dramatic increase in the prestige and initiative of the UN Secretary-General. This was especially at the time when the position was held by the charismatic Dag Hammarskjöld - from 1953 until his death in a plane crash in the Congo in 1961. The UN secretariat came to represent the apparent 'democratisation' of the organisation, as the General Assembly began to assert itself after a decade of US domination. (A vivid insight into how this American pressure operated can be found in Conor Cruise O'Brien's *To Katanga and Back*.)

### **The breakdown of such states...revealed a maelstrom of elemental national forces**



A UN soldier on duty at Kigali Airport, Rwanda ©

What some have called the 'third world UN' emerged out of the shadow of the 'cold war UN', to the horror of conservative American opinion, which had expected the UN to function as a vehicle for US values - or in effect US policy.

The end of the cold war triggered an unprecedented upsurge in UN commitments. Despite the recurrent funding problems, of the kind that had also dogged the old League, the upbeat official view was that the organisation's prestige had never been so high. But the nature of the problems emerging in the last decade of the 20th century was extremely worrying.

The title 'nation' had always been (for both League and UN) a polite fiction for a club of sovereign states, who often contained within them various ethnically diverse minority groups, sometimes with a claim to nationhood in their own right. These states often denied the rights of their constituent nations to self-determination, and the breakdown of such states as Lebanon, Yugoslavia, and Somalia during the 1990s, revealed a maelstrom of elemental national

forces. These could not be compartmentalised into old-fashioned sovereign states of the kind that the UN exists to guarantee, leaving the organisation unsure of how to treat them.

## The challenge ahead

Still more worrying was the explosive upsurge of terrorist violence, which in many places has dissolved the shape of military conflict in ways that make the traditional methods of monitoring ineffective. If there is to be a new age of terrorism, it can only be countered by the development of international - indeed global - security agencies. Only the UN could provide a framework for these; yet the possibility of taking effective measures is likely to be frustrated by the difficulty of finding a common definition of terrorism.



Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, founder of the Islamic group Hamas ©

### ...labelling is inescapably a political act

The League of Nations tried to draw up a Convention against Terrorism in the 1930s, and could not get general agreement. The wider circumstances of that time were unpropitious, but the basic problem persists: as President Assad of Egypt told Tony Blair, in the wake of the attack on New York on September 11 2001, labelling is inescapably a political act. Members of Hamas (the Islamic resistance movement), and the Islamic Jihad organisation, may be terrorists to the government of Israel, but to others they are fighters against oppression. Does the UN have the 'grip' to impose a common view?

## Find out more

### Books

*The United Nations: Sacred Drama* by Conor Cruise O'Brien and Feliks Topolski (Simon & Schuster, 1968)

*The Rise of the International Organisation. A Short History* by David Armstrong (Palgrave Macmillan, 1982)

*Peacekeeping in International Politics* by Alan James (Palgrave, 1990)

'The Evolution of United Nations Peacekeeping' by Marrack Goulding, in *International Affairs* vol.69 (1993)

*The Evolution of UN Peacekeeping: Case Studies and Comparative Analysis* edited by William J Durch (Palgrave Macmillan, 1993)

'Democracies and UN Peacekeeping Operations 1990-1996' by Andreas Andersson, in *International Peacekeeping* vol.7 (2000)

## About the author

Charles Townshend is Professor of International History at Keele University. His most recent book is *Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2002). He has held Fellowships at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, DC. He currently holds a Leverhulme Major Fellowship to work on the history of the 1916 Irish Rebellion.