

Internationalism Reconfigured. Transnational Ideas and Movements Between the World Wars

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This book is a showcase for the work of some recently-successful doctoral scholars, nine of its ten contributors falling into this category. Most of them wrote their theses at British universities, but three did so in Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. The tenth contributor is Professor Patricia Clavin of Oxford University, whose valuable introductory chapter sets the stage for what follows and provides the analytical framework for the subsequent case studies.

The unifying focus of these studies is on international or internationally-related activity of what many would call a 'non-political' kind, notwithstanding the conceptual perils which are all too often associated with that term. Thus most of the book deals with the role or approach of non-state actors (including thinkers) in their endeavours to influence the inter-state scene, but attention is also paid to some economic and financial work which was channelled through the Geneva-based League of Nations. And, as is noted, although the League went into decline as the 1930s progressed, the gathering political clouds did not in themselves hamper the conduct of cross-border technical cooperation. However, there is 'no escaping the primacy of the state' (p. 11). And so, as Alexander Loveday (the highly-respected League secretariat official responsible for the organisation of its financial section and economic intelligence work) recognised, interwar internationalism was 'not always effective'. Nonetheless, it was 'hugely creative because "before the [second world] war it was the practice to appoint advisory bodies composed of individuals acting in a personal capacity entrusted with the task of examining questions dispassionately"' (p. 11). This practice did not survive during the remainder of the century.

The nine case studies are divided into three parts. In the first of these – on ‘the discourses and concepts that underpinned different varieties of nationalism’ (p. xiii) – Waqar Zaidi discusses how science and technology were envisaged as drivers of interdependence, and how this affected particular initiatives. Work in these areas was, it was widely assumed, ‘essentially civilian and peaceful ... [while] military developments were a perversion’ (p. 31). Yet, as Zaidi notes it was also believed that destructive modern weaponry could be employed in the service of peace. Hence David Davies (Lord Davies as he became in 1932) touted the view that the world needed an international police force with a monopoly of the world’s bombers, tanks, heavy artillery, submarines and poison gas. (And, it may be noted, so strongly did Davies feel on the subject that he later regretted endowing the Woodrow Wilson chair of International Relations at Aberystwyth University because ‘All the professors from Zimmern onwards opposed these ideas, with the result that we have been landed in another ... war’.)⁽¹⁾ Katharina Rietzler’s study of US philanthropic foundations and their activities in Europe and the USA demonstrates how they tailored grant-giving to promote new international structures and develop expert knowledge. (Recipients of funds included Chatham House, the London School of Economics and the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva.) She goes on to show how this influenced the infant academic discipline of international relations and led to the production of seminal books such as Sarah Wambaugh’s on plebiscites and Raymond Buell’s on colonial Africa. Interestingly, Rietzler also argues that these foundations were ahead of US public opinion and government policy in encouraging support for the League’s technical work. The final contributor to this part, Stefan Couperus, explores the transnational interchanges that arose following the municipalisation of urban utilities and welfare provisions, with particular reference to the *Union Internationale des Villes* (or International Union of Local Authorities). Although the *Union* envisaged municipal administration as a transnational (and hence ‘non-political’) project, local, national, international, political, and scientific differences nonetheless led to cleavages and rivalries, hence turning it into what many would see as a typically political scene.

The second part of the book focuses directly on non-governmental organizations’ interactions with the League of Nations. Amalia Ribí shows how, thanks to efficient networking and skilful lobbying, the British Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society was the most influential humanitarian campaigning group at Geneva. But its work was infused with a sense of national superiority and imperial identity, which hindered co-operation with other associations, for example, the Swiss *Bureau International pour la Défense des Indigènes* (International Bureau for the Protection of Native Races (Coloured Races)), which refused to play a subservient role to the London society. More specifically, one of the latter’s leading campaigners, John Harris, could barely ‘conceal his personal irritation’ (p. 100) with calls by the Pan-African Congress for self-government and League supervision of native rights – and this was the man who in his *Times* obituary (2 May 1940) was described as having ‘wise judgement’ and a deep interest in the welfare of Africans. Yann Decorzant’s chapter on the emergence of the League’s Economic and Financial Organisation – ‘the first international organisation fully dedicated to international economic and financial management’ (p. 115) – demonstrates the importance of the networks which arose during the First World War, and complements Rietzler in drawing attention to the fact that appointment by a government to an international body did not necessarily mean that the appointees were expected to support governmental policy. For example, at a 1920 financial conference in Brussels, all the delegates were appointed by governments, but some were appointed as individual experts and hence not expected to act as governmental mouthpieces. Frank Beyersdorf’s contribution to this part of the book examines the role played in 1923 by central bankers, international financiers, Austrian officials, and the League in rescuing Austria from the financial mess into which she had fallen. In Beyersdorf’s view, while it was ‘attractive interest rates and behind-the-scenes brokering by bankers and financial experts from London, New York and Geneva which brought about the [necessary] long-term loan’, it was the League and its Financial Committee which should be credited with ‘the real work of reconstruction’ (p. 149), as only it could provide the required mechanisms to achieve the desired result. (The former allies’ insistence on international control over Austria’s expenditure, lest money be poured into a ‘bottomless pit’ (p. 139), resonates uncannily with the current Eurozone crisis.)

The third part of the book, on ‘transnational and national contexts of activity’, begins with Marie Sandell’s chapter on the efforts of women’s organisations in the 1920s to ‘expand beyond the West’, that is, beyond

the cultural confines of North America, Europe, and the antipodean dominions. But although they multiplied the number of their members by loosening and bending their rules and constitutions, their discourse remained rooted in Western cultural traditions, and they continued to be dominated by Western women. Helen McCarthy (echoing Ribí) finds the leadership of the British League of Nations Union (LNU), the leading pro-League pressure group in Britain, to be a creature of its time, imbued with a sense of national superiority which was particularly marked in smug, private comments about, say, “‘frog[s], ‘small dark Latin races’ and ‘dago nations’” (p. 201). Finally, Daniel Laqua’s fascinating chapter on the place of the *Deutsche Liga für Menschenrechte* (DLM, the German League for Human Rights) in inter-war pacifism not only highlights the aspirations and practices of those working for a new international order, but also the obstacles presented by national and institutional frameworks. A small organisation that never numbered more than 2,000, it operated in an unfavourable domestic environment, and it and its members were bestowed with the epithet ‘*Landesverräter*’ (traitor) (p. 226) by the right-wing press. Nonetheless, it engaged in valuable activity that helped stabilise Franco-German relations in the early post-war years.

Laqua is to be congratulated for his skilful editing of this very interesting collection of essays, which will be valuable to all who are interested in international co-operation between the wars and the role of non-governmental organizations on the world stage. The rich and learned endnotes in themselves repay study, testifying to the book’s admirable scholarship. The only slips noted by this reviewer are little more than trivial. Ribí, no doubt thinking of the United Nations, refers to the League Assembly as its ‘General Assembly’ (p. 102), and appears to mistake the year (1923) when Lord Robert Cecil became a Viscount. Beyersdorf describes the League’s Commissioner-General to Austria as a ‘High Commissioner’, and is inconsistent in spelling his name: even on one single page he twice calls him ‘Zimmermann’ and twice ‘Zimmerman’ (p. 141). Contrary to Zaidi’s assertion (p. 21), Philip Noel-Baker was never a diplomat in the conventional sense of being a member of a state’s foreign service (indeed, Noel-Baker once told this reviewer never to forget that the letter ‘D’ stands for ‘the devil, diplomats, and duplicity’). And it is surprising that while Jean Monnet is referred to several times in Decorzant’s chapter, David Mitrany and the ‘functionalism’ with which he is associated is nowhere mentioned in the main text.

This last point may perhaps have something to do with the gap, or even the modest gulf, which has often been said to exist between students of international history and of international relations. Judging by the information given in the book about its contributors, it would seem that almost all, if not all, of them would categorize themselves as historians. And it appears from what several of them say that until the 1990s historians’ interest in international organisations, internationalism, and transnationalism was confined to the areas which are frequently termed ‘high politics’. This is not to suggest that students of international relations have gone overboard in the other direction. Far from it. But they can be credited with having paid some attention to the League’s non-political side, and to having for quite a while talked about internationalism and transnationalism. Which observation seems to be leading to the banal conclusion that there should be more interaction between the two disciplines. Instead, let me simply say, with some emphasis, that all those with an interest in organisational goings-on and in internationalism would do very well to acquaint themselves with this book.

Notes

1. Brian Porter, ‘The enforcement of peace’, in *Thinkers of the Twenty Years’ Crisis. Inter-War Idealism Reassessed*, ed. David Long and Peter Wilson (Oxford, 1995), p. 70. [Back to \(1\)](#)

The editor of the volume wishes to thank Dr Lloyd for her kind and careful review

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