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Guarantee of Peace: The League of Nations in British Policy 1914-1925

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Reviewer:

Carolyn Kitching

Peter Yearwood has carried out impressively extensive research to produce this account of how British foreign policy was closely linked to the formation and operation of the League of Nations in its early years. An enormous amount of detail is densely packed into every page which makes the book a mine of information for academics working in this field, though for this reason it could prove rather daunting for the casual reader, or under-graduate student. The attention to detail and depth of analysis enable the author to challenge some of the accepted views of Britain's relationship with the League, and in some instances to present a very different interpretation from the traditional idea of British reluctance to engage with the newly-formed League.

Yearwood's own explanation of the genesis of the book sets the tone: he began his research into Britain's relationship with the League expecting it to lead him to follow an 'established paradigm' (p. 2), supporting an established historiographical debate, but instead the documents led him to conclude that Britain had, in fact, engaged fully in the idea of a league of nations from a very early stage of the First World War. Their aim was 'a solution to practical problems rather than 'the application of a theory' (p. 2) but nevertheless, a commitment to such a league was evident almost from the outbreak of war in 1914. Initially the idea behind the league was a policy of 'Atlanticism', which would bind British policy closely to that of the United

States 'partly out of a real belief that peace in Europe would be more secure if the United States was committed to its maintenance' (p. 3). During the course of the War, however, British statesmen began to conclude that France was now the 'paramount concern' and that 'French policy was the most dangerous disturbing element in Europe' (p. 4). This, of course, was to be a recurring theme in British policy throughout the whole inter-war period, and the balancing of this with the input of the United States remained Britain's war-time goal until America's withdrawal from the League process in 1920. America's decision to retreat into isolationism left Britain with the task of reconciling France and Germany, and British statesmen saw the possibilities of using the League to assist them in this policy.

From as early as 1915, Yearwood points out that Lord Robert Cecil, traditionally seen as one of the chief architects of the League, believed there was no point in relying on America: 'America cannot make good' he repeatedly declared (p. 13). It would thus appear that the later decision of America to withdraw should not have come as a surprise to the peacemakers at Versailles. Indeed by 1916 it had already become apparent that the United States' main interest was not in the terms of the settlement, 'but only in the guarantees of peace, which were to be found in disarmament and 'a league of nations to secure each nation against aggression and maintain the absolute freedom of the seas'' (p. 17) which was to remain a consistent theme of American policy during the inter-war years, and which British statesmen were pleased to note was not actually catered for in the final version of the Covenant (p. 129). America was looking for a 'peace without victory' (p. 37). The issue of disarmament was, quite understandably, a central theme in early discussions of a league of nations, though opinions on the feasibility of implement it varied, Balfour declaring the difficulties associated with disarmament to be 'insuperable' (p. 21), and Hankey maintaining that this should be the league's only role, but only if the German people could be induced 'to listen to the voice of reason' (p. 23).

As with the whole of this book, the amount of detail on the way in which the formation of a league of nations was woven into British policy is impressive, and Yearwood provides clear evidence that the League, in its final form, was not something to which the British subscribed only in the belief that it would bind the United States closer to European politics, but that there was a genuine belief that it could both resolve existing problems, and prevent new ones arising. He examines the impact of the abrupt ending of the war, the changes in direction which this necessitated, and the dissension over what the League should actually be. What emerged was the belief in official British thinking in the centrality of a guarantee which the League should embody.

Having established, in great detail, the prominence of a league of nations in British war-time policy, Yearwood goes on to examine the complicated negotiations which led to the formation of the post-war League of Nations. He also provides great detail on the interpretation of the chief articles of the League. The League which eventually emerged became central to successive British governments' foreign policies, resulting in an eclipse of the Foreign Office, placing greater emphasis on the influence of the Cabinet Office and Prime Minister's personal secretariat (p. 87). With the overall theme always being the way in which the League remained central to British policy, the book examines the early years, including the major events of the Corfu incident, the Treaty of Mutual Guarantee, Geneva Protocol and ending with the negotiations for the Locarno Treaties of 1925.

While disarmament had been shown to be at the heart of the rationale for a League of Nations, it proved an elusive goal. Yearwood points out that the Washington Naval Treaties, which effectively ended the Anglo-American naval rivalry, were reached outside the League arena, and 'provided a model of what might be achieved in one part of the world'. This was not, however, yet applicable to Europe, where America would not make the same commitment as it had done in the Far East, rather appearing as 'Uncle Shylock' the 'implacable collector of war debts' (p. 147). In some areas Yearwood's obvious commitment to his subject almost brings the League back to life. For example, in describing the battle between various members of the League Council as to whether Armenia should be admitted to the League, he comments that 'In the history of the League this was seen as a defining moment. For the first time the 'atmosphere of Geneva' had entered the lungs of the delegates'. The experience 'did much to quicken its consciousness of itself as a corporate body having a life and unity of its own' (p. 175).

Failures are, of course, a part of League history: its first crisis was over a dispute between Russia and Persia, though set against this was the successful outcome of the 'land islands dispute; however, by 1922 Philip Baker was already drawing up for the Secretary-General, a memorandum entitled 'The Failure of the League and its Causes' (p. 209) and there was certainly a view that it had not 'pulled its weight' in the Corfu incident (p. 270).

In Chapter five Yearwood moves on to look at the League's attempts to settle one of the major issues in its care: the question of disarmament. It is interesting to note that he states that 'London saw elaborating a comprehensive plan of international disarmament as the most important task which would eventually confront the League of Nations' (p. 211). The author of this review would be interested to know on what evidence he bases that opinion. There could well be an argument that Britain considered the question difficult rather than important, or even that it was content to let the League address a problem it would rather not address itself. The analysis of the Esher Plan and Cecil's proposed Treaty of Mutual Guarantee is, once again, meticulously researched and highlights the fact that Esher's proposals were not supported by the British Government, and Cecil effectively pushed them out of the way in favour of his own. Disarmament was not, of course, the only item on the League's agenda in 1922 and 1923, and detailed accounts of both the Chanak and Corfu crises are provided.

In considering one of the most famous (or infamous) attempts of the League to reach a disarmament agreement, the abortive Geneva Protocol of 1924, Yearwood provides his usual detailed approach. In the course of this discussion he points out that many historians of the time attribute the idea that the Protocol would involve the British Fleet in being placed at the disposal of the League Council to a conspiracy by 'the most moderate Conservative organs', when it was, in fact, the French press who began this story 'a small point but one which has significance for students of the story of the Protocol' (p. 308). In analysing what many at the time thought of a disaster 'the rejection of the Protocol' Yearwood points out that, had it come into force, it would have clashed with the Covenant in a number of areas (p. 315). He also clarifies one of the most famous quotes associated with the Foreign Secretary, Austen Chamberlain, who, when repeating Bismarck's quote that the 'Polish corridor is not worth the bones of a British grenadier' was careful to add 'if that alone is in dispute' 'a very telling and often forgotten qualification' (p. 340).

At first sight the final chapter on the build-up towards Locarno may seem out of place in a study of the League of Nations, as the majority of the negotiations took place outside of the League structure, but Yearwood clearly demonstrates how Chamberlain endeavoured to tie these negotiations into the League, the main aim of which appears to have been to bring Germany into the League, an action about which Germany seemed increasingly less enthusiastic (p. 355).

In addition to providing a very thorough account of British policy in relation to the League of Nations in the period to 1925, Yearwood has drawn some interesting characterisations of the chief British statesmen of the period. His interpretation of the character of Lord Robert Cecil, one of the most central personalities, is often quite different from the normally accepted version. The Cecil papers revealed the 'calculations of an active ambitious politician' and not the 'idealist' he had expected to find. Lloyd George found Cecil 'spiteful and

malicious?, and even the gentler Asquith had called him a 'ruffian' (p. 33). The portrayal of him as a unworldly idealist, a 'civic monk' is deeply misleading: he was an ambitious man whose overriding aim was to bring down Lloyd George (p. 151), which might, of course, go some way to explaining Lloyd George's view of him! Curzon's view was that he possessed 'poor judgement and [is] irresponsible' (p. 232) but before supporters of Cecil rush to his defence, Yearwood does comment that in the conflict between idealism and cunning 'of course, he was both' (p. 224). Austen Chamberlain was a 'helpless, awkward, indecisive, vague man' in the opinion of one German diplomat. (p. 347). Hankey's well-known cunning and diplomacy shine through in places, but, as in many accounts of this period, it is Balfour's character which is perhaps the most tantalising. Described by Churchill as being 'like a powerful graceful cat', Balfour's enthusiasm nevertheless 'eventually demolished the one-armed bandit in the foyer of the Hôtel Beau Rivage?', and for all his famed languor and apparent indifference, 'good friends of the League and close observers believed that he had an unmistakably genuine faith in the new institution' (p. 171).

Overall, this is a very authoritative study of British policy towards the League, meticulously researched and written. There are one or two slight criticisms. Some of the referencing is unclear, as, in some cases, many quotes come from one source, the reference to which is placed at the end of the series, and in other instances a number of sources are grouped together without it being quite explicit where each comes from. This is, in one respect, a necessary procedure as the footnoting could well take up half of every page if each individual quote were referenced, but in some cases clarity seems to have been sacrificed in the interests of brevity. Also in relation to the question of clarity, one paragraph begins 'The historian of British policy over the optional clause ??' (p. 291). Do we assume this is Lloyd? Again, the referencing system makes this unclear. In some cases the attention to detail is a little over-stretched: for example the emphasis on a 'careful, very careful, reading' of Cecil's speech (p. 115), and it may be verging on pedantry to point out in a footnote that the attention of an archivist had been drawn to an uncorrected fault in the date of a manuscript (p. 218).

Nevertheless, these criticisms are minor irritations rather than issues which detract from the overall quality of this work. This book represents a thorough and authoritative account of Britain's relationship with the League of Nations, and will undoubtedly take its place as an invaluable reference tool for serious researchers in this area.

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