

WHAT IS LEFT OF THE LEAGUE?

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IT is almost inevitable that an era of transition should also be an era of evasion. In a time when drastic changes are inescapable, there is a natural and universal desire to accomplish such changes at a minimum of sacrifice. The hope that by being postponed they will somehow turn out to be no longer necessary; the effort to direct any readjustment into channels which will shift the cost to someone else; even, in the last resort, the stubborn denial that changes are needed at all—these are phenomena which have been all too evident throughout the chaos of the past five years.

Now all through human history the immortal gods have seen to it that this lack of realism shall carry its own retribution. Their revenge must be all the more piquant, since the adherents of a policy of resistance are prone to insist that they are the only true realists. If their claim were true, it would be high time to put the idealists in charge of the world. But it is not true; and today, before our eyes, nemesis is inexorably overtaking a world whose rulers have steadfastly refused to face the plain facts of politics and economics.

There is no need to point to the results in the internal affairs of the various nations. They are sufficiently evident on this continent; they are prophetically appalling when we look abroad. Yet in these matters there is at least a possibility that the necessary readjustment will be effected, however slowly and painfully. It is in the international situation that the real danger lies. For if one thing is evident, it is that the refusals and evasions of the post-war period have led the world into an impasse from which, apart from a miracle, the only escape is war—a war which may well end in the collapse of the whole social order.

Nowhere is this more tragically clear than in the plight of the League of Nations. The lessons to be drawn from its failure in the Ethiopian crisis have not always been accurately appreciated. There is in some quarters a tendency to accept this failure with a smug complacency, as proving the futility of any effort at a collective system and the necessity of relying on the ancient and traditional system of "Every nation for itself and God for us all." What it proves in fact is the vital need for a new approach, a more serious effort, toward the establishment of the rule of law in international affairs, if we are to escape the disastrous consequences of inter-

national anarchy—consequences of which the last war was only the first grim foreshadowing.

The League of Nations was called into being by the need for some international organ or organs which could fulfil three important functions. The first was the administration of the numerous clauses in the peace treaties—plebiscites, mandates, reparations—left as legacies from the Conferences. The second was the coordination of international efforts and information in economic and social matters. The third, and immeasurably the most important, was the settlement of international disputes by peaceful means instead of war. The first two could be, and in some cases were, entrusted to minor commissions. But the third called for the concerted efforts of the whole civilized world; upon it centred the hopes of war-wearied peoples; and by its success in achieving this purpose the League was bound to stand or fall.

Unfortunately the state of the world in 1919, while it gave rise to an imperative demand for some method of abolishing war, also made it impossible to fulfil that desire. The authors of the Covenant showed both daring and resolution in their attempt. Whatever legitimate criticism may be directed against their finished work, the charge that it was in advance of public opinion is rather to their credit than otherwise. Besides, it is not wholly true. In any case, they were bound to press matters to the limit of justifiable expectation, and to risk much for so great a gain. Yet even so they were unable to find a solid foundation for their work, and their inevitable failure to reconcile the various incompatibles which confronted them doomed the structure from the start.

To begin with, they had to base the League upon the sovereignty of its individual members. That in itself was almost a contradiction in terms, yet the necessity was inescapable. No country on earth would willingly have submitted to government by a World State. The rampant nationalism which had been steadily growing in aggressiveness before the war had received an incalculable impetus from its outcome. The various states, new as well as old, were more insistent than ever on their right to live their own lives in their own way, and on their demands that the world should place at their disposal the resources which would enable them to fulfil their high opinion of their own destiny. The idea that they should abandon their private ambitions in the interests of the general welfare was completely foreign to the temper of the times. It was a world of violent and acquisitive individualism.

This meant that the insistence on sovereignty was accompanied by an equal insistence on security. This has continued to be the dominant problem for the League. Upon its solution

depended the whole programme for the elimination of war. If the various states had viewed the world as an inter-dependent community, the test of the League would have been its success in promoting cooperation and advancing the interests of the community as a whole. But when each state insisted primarily upon the protection of its own position and interests, each would judge the value of the League solely upon the ability to protect those interests against the claims or threats of its fellow-members—or even to advance its ambitions at their expense.

This, of course, was an impossible task. The very basis of the demand for security prevented its fulfilment by any form of a collective system. You cannot base a cooperative organization upon a competitive society. And so long as rival states refused to abandon their mutually incompatible ambitions, and insisted on pursuing them without interference, the League's chances of creating a peace world were meagre in the extreme.

The dilemma is plain enough. If security and sovereignty are inconsistent, one of them has to go. Faced with this, the unanimous choice of the leading nations has been to cling to sovereignty and take a chance on security. There in its bare essentials is the root denial of that vital basis without which the League is impotent. Confronted with the political cost of a peace world, the nations have turned away from it and reverted once more to the old disastrous methods of the Balance of Power.

And so the post-war world has watched the spectacle—not, of course, entirely unprecedented—of the nations united in lip service to an ideal which their whole practice consistently denied. Behind the facade of the League has been the sordid reality of pre-war methods—the scramble for advantages, for agreements, for alliances which would protect the gains already acquired or encourage the prospect of new acquisitions at the expense of rivals. In this return to a predatory anarchy there can be no hope of real security. But it offers a gambler's chance for temporary advantages won by pressure of armed alliance. The price is ultimately war, but that lies in the future; whereas only immediate and permanent sacrifices can give the stability at which the League method aims.

But there is another dilemma whose lack of solution has further aggravated the situation. Beyond the problem of reconciling security with sovereignty lies the further question of combining both of these with flexibility. A stable world does not mean a static one. The social and economic changes which are continually in progress in the modern world necessitate political adjustments as well. Any successful collective system must develop some satisfactory machinery for peaceful change.

It is hardly surprising that no such machinery was embodied in the Covenant. There is a gesture toward it in Article XIX, enabling the League to recommend reconsideration of treaties which are no longer applicable; but it is only a gesture, and the vicissitudes of this article in successive drafts of the Covenant suggest that its authors were by no means unanimous about its desirability.

The truth is, of course, that considerations based on sovereignty or on security alike ruled out the possibility of any provision for flexibility. To the hysterical nationalist spirit of the present day, with its slogans about "rightful claims" and "vital interests," with its high-sounding phrases about national honour and racial supremacy—phrases useful as a cloak for a callous disregard of law or justice or humanity—the whole idea is anathema. No state will surrender to an international body its right to judge the nature of its own destiny and the means by which that destiny shall be attained. No state will consent to its existing possessions and position being placed in continual jeopardy at the hands of the League. Such an abdication is impossible to envisage. It would rob both security and sovereignty, as at present conceived, of any meaning whatever.

It is worth remarking that this would remain true, no matter how the map of Europe was arranged. There is a tendency to attribute much of the weakness of the League to its close connection with the Treaty of Versailles. Undoubtedly that treaty, and the others which accompanied it, have been a cause of serious friction and discontent, and an obstacle to conciliation and goodwill. But no conceivable readjustment of European boundaries could succeed in eliminating these evils, or in satisfying all the clashing national ambitions which disrupt the European family. It would merely create new grievances in place of the present ones. So long as national frontiers mean anything, a universally acceptable settlement is a chimera.

The League, then, was in no position to set out by inaugurating a régime of universal justice in regard to territorial distribution. It had no choice but to start from the *status quo*. And, in spite of the grave objections raised by Article X, it probably had no choice but to guarantee the *status quo* against change by violence. One essential condition for the establishment of the rule of law is that illegality shall be made unprofitable to the lawbreaker; only then can steps be taken toward the elimination of injustice. With this as a starting point it could be hoped that, once the nations were freed from the fear of armed aggression, they would be willing to turn their attention to the deeper causes from which

wars have always sprung. With the horrors of the last war still vivid, it could be felt with confidence that every effort would be made to prevent their recurrence. If a breathing spell could be provided, mankind would surely take advantage of it. Reason would assert itself; men would apply to international affairs the dearly bought lessons of experience; habits of peaceful cooperation would establish themselves; and war, and the causes of war, would thus be banished for ever.

We can see now that these hopes were far too optimistic. The early believers in the League under-estimated the tenacity of mankind's persistent determination to eat its cake and have it. The world still refused to choose between incompatibles. Nations which repudiated any desire for war were still determined to secure the fruits of war—and, in the end, to risk war rather than forego them. They were all willing to pledge themselves to peace; they were at one in their refusal to make the sacrifices by which alone peace could be assured.

There is the true significance of the insistence on untrammelled national sovereignty. It is a bulwark behind which dominant economic interests pursue their acquisitive ends. The plight of the Danubian area is only too apt an illustration of this. No sooner were new national frontiers created than behind them there sprang up new vested interests. They sought to monopolize the home market against their foreign competitors. They sought to invade the markets of those competitors, who in turn fought to exclude them. The result was a series of national tariff walls, which split a natural economic area into a series of fragments whose economic life is being slowly strangled. It is typical of what has happened throughout the world.

Against these forces of self-destruction, reason and sanity have been powerless. In a closed world, where there are no longer enough markets and resources to go round, and where expansion can no longer take place except at the expense of a competitor, each national group is determined to secure a monopoly on those essentials which will not only assure its own prosperity, but also offer an indefinite margin of safety to take care of future growth. In the modern industrial world there are no satiated states. Wisdom cries aloud that cooperation is the only solution. But that means that each nation must sacrifice something of its possessions or its ambitions. And while all agree that cooperation is desirable, the moment there is mention of tariffs or trade routes, of currency or oil or immigration, the interests affected rise in their wrath and another conference breaks up amid mutual recriminations.

And so the League has been denied the essentials which alone can make it workable, and has been used by its leading members as a screen for the old established game of power politics. The great powers especially, who alone could give the League the force with which to prevent war or punish an aggressor, are just the ones who feel most able to depend on their own strength to secure their own ends, or to purchase alliances without any sacrifice comparable to that which a whole-hearted support of the League would exact. Naturally it is those ends and those alliances which will determine their course in a crisis, as was pitifully evident in the Manchurian and Ethiopian affairs. The League is still useful for their purposes as a pawn in the balance of power. France showed how it could be used in the decade after the war. Britain, in a more fumbling fashion, gave another demonstration over Ethiopia. Neither policy can be said to have advanced the fortunes of the League.

The irresistible conclusion is that no nation wants peace sufficiently to pay the necessary price. For peace has to be paid for. Idealism is not enough. It is impossible for the world to have peace and insist still on retaining all the things which are the active causes of war. It is all very well to renounce war with public protestations; but the signatories of the Kellogg Pact, however sincere their intentions, did nothing whatever to check those tangible and extremely active forces which are pushing the world inexorably toward a new catastrophe. Not all the expressions of goodwill can delay that catastrophe a single hour, unless they are accompanied by effective and drastic changes in the economic and political organization of the world.

It may also be said in passing that the entry of the United States into the League would by no means be decisive for peace. It would of course be an event of the highest importance. It is perfectly obvious that no League can proceed with complete success as long as one of the Great Powers remains aloof. But it does not follow that universality would insure its success. In the years between 1926 and 1931 the League was at the peak of its career. Its membership has never been so nearly complete. And although both Russia and the United States were non-members, they were in very close cooperation with the League throughout this period, and lent their weight to the major undertakings which it inaugurated. In spite of this, the efforts in such fields as disarmament and economics ended in complete failure. The United States was no more willing than the other powers to make the full sacrifices which were essential to success.

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Only if frontiers are deprived of any major significance, if territorial possession ceases to have any serious economic or strategic importance, will the renunciation of war have any reality. But this can never happen so long as national frontiers are used to shelter exploitation for profit, or so long as the world is a field for rival enterprises the aim of whose competition is nothing short of monopoly. We can keep unlimited competition based on nationalism, and have war. We can substitute economic cooperation on an international scale, and have at least the hope of peace. There is no third possibility.

War is thus inherent in the present situation. It is unlikely that the drastic and fundamental changes necessary to remove it will be made in the near future. But until they are made, the League will never be given effective power, and the next war will come in spite of all it can do. It cannot at present hope to prevent a clash between two great powers who are in conflict over irreconcilable claims. It can still prevent war between secondary states, provided the great powers are not using those states as essential pawns. It can provide machinery for consultation in crises, for conciliation where conciliation is at all possible, perhaps for delay where delay is likely to prove of value. It can stand by to pick up the pieces when the explosion is over, and hope to introduce a new symmetry into the design in the process of putting them back together. And of course it will remain invaluable as an instrument for collecting information and coordinating international activities. In all these things it is unique, and represents a tremendous advance over anything in history. But it cannot act as an agent of universal peace so long as the world insists on preferring war to the changes which alone will make peace possible.

And yet the League offers the only hope for the abolition of war. Alliances and armaments are not an alternative—they are only the symptoms of a world in which war is chronic. Nor is the current talk of a reorganized League a hopeful sign. To reform it on a basis of regional agreements, or to reduce it to a purely consultative rôle, may bring it nearer to the temper of the times. But it will not make the League more effective for peace—it is merely a gesture of pessimism and surrender. Only an exactly opposite development holds any hope—not a change in the League, but a change in world society. It is a great deal to ask of humanity. When translated into tangible terms, it seems to many disruptive of our present social basis. But great dangers demand great sacrifices, and the price is steadily rising as the chances of preserving peace recede. And however high that price, it will in the end be infinitely cheap compared with the cost that will be exacted of civilization by the war which is almost upon us.