

The quest for peace yesterday and today [Continuation]

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THE QUEST FOR PEACE YESTERDAY AND TODAY.

Memorial Lecture given by Professor William E. Rappard, of the University of Geneva, Director, Graduate Institute of International Studies, at the David Davies Memorial Institute of International Studies, April, 1954.

(Continuation)

WHY THE LEAGUE FAILED.

That the League of Nations had failed long before it was legally dissolved after the second World War, before even the outbreak of this catastrophe which it had not been able to prevent, is clear to all.

Its foes declared that it was a failure from its very birth. Its friends disputed this. Some, doubtless, because they weakly indulged in wishful thinking, that terrible mental disease which makes one confuse hopes and prospects. Easy intellectual optimism is for the mind a dangerous habit-forming drug. As such it may well be compared to the narcotics that at first seem to exalt, but in the end never fail to sap, the vitality of the body.

Others deliberately silenced their sincerely felt misgivings. Early fearing that the League could not, under the circumstances which prevailed shortly after its birth, fulfill its main purpose of preventing war, but realizing that its only chance of success lay in the public confidence it sought to inspire, they were loath to play into the hands of its foes in undermining that confidence by openly admitting their apprehensions.

Besides, even if they could entertain no great hopes as to the ability of the League to solve what Lord Davies called the problem of the twentieth century, was the League not doing very useful work in fostering, promoting and organizing international cooperation in the important fields of economics, finance and public health? This work they deemed worth while in the immediate present and promising for the future. First, because it directly tended to improve the lot of mankind by giving all nations, and particularly the most needy, the benefit of common experience and common resources. And secondly, because it thereby indirectly engendered habits of collaboration between leading politicians and influential civil servants of various departments of national administrations. Who could say whether the friendly and intimate connections thus established in non-contentious fields would not perhaps in times of inter-

national crisis prove helpful in abating antipathies and thereby prevent the outbreak of violence?

However, now that the League is dead, nothing is to be gained from further self-deception. Everything, on the contrary, speaks for undertaking its autopsy with complete candour, in an attempt to determine the real causes of its prolonged agony and final decease.

For Lord Davies, the main weakness of the League was due to flaws in its constitutional structure. Writing in 1930 he declared:

"There may be many defects in the Covenant, but broadly speaking, they may be classified under three headings. Firstly, it fails to define the aggressor; secondly, it lacks military and naval sanctions; thirdly, it leaves the problem of disarmament unsolved."

Doubtless it would have been a better and a safer world if it had been possible to win, not only the formal approval but also and especially the active and loyal cooperation of at least all the leading powers, in an association the charter of which had embodied such provisions. But this, as Lord Davies was the first to recognize, was clearly out of the question. He himself remarks that when, in March 1919, President Wilson:

"Returned to Paris after his hurried visit to Washington he must have realized that no League equipped with the 'major force' could hope to run the gauntlet of the Senate. Consequently, he may have been compelled to choose between an emasculated and sanctionless League with the United States as a possible member or a virile and practical organization

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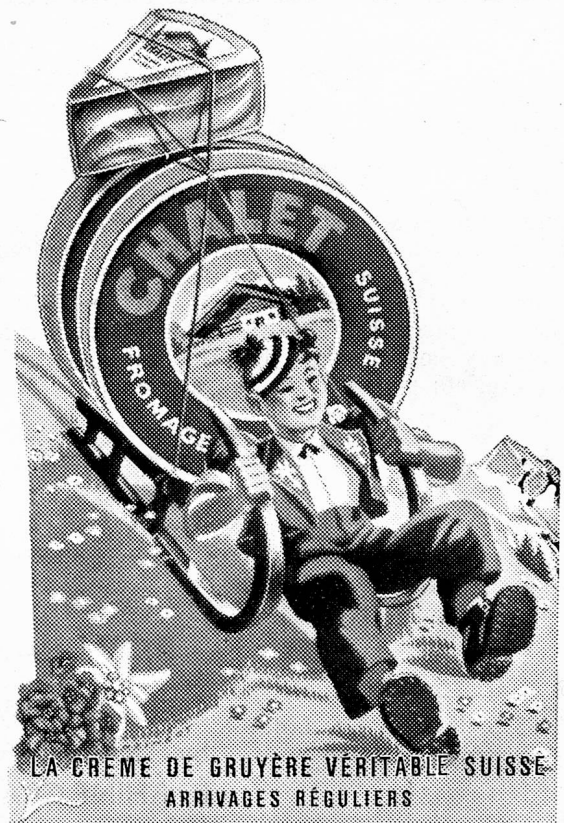
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with America outside the circle of its membership. Confronted with this dilemma, President Wilson could hardly be blamed for adopting the first alternative — obviously he could not contemplate a League which did not include his own country..."

As subsequent events showed tragically, even what Lord Davies describes as an "emasculated and sanctionless League" proved far too tempting a target for American nationalist and isolationist opposition. It is not, in my opinion, because the Covenant, as it was finally drafted, was too weak a document, but because its admittedly very cautious provisions still proved too bold to secure American ratification, that the League failed.

It is idle to speculate what would have happened if an international constitution as ambitious as were Lord Davies' demands had emerged from the Peace Conference in 1919. Everything leads one to believe that the United States would then not have been alone in repudiating it. What one knows, however, is that the American Senate and, I am afraid, even the American people, holding the League as framed in Paris with the approval of their President to be incompatible with the exigencies of their national sovereignty, turned their backs on it. It was this major betrayal of the hopes of clear-sighted and progressive friends of peace all over the world that, as I see it, killed the League even before it was born.

What was born under its name and formally under its Covenant was an institution for the discussion and promotion of international affairs of various

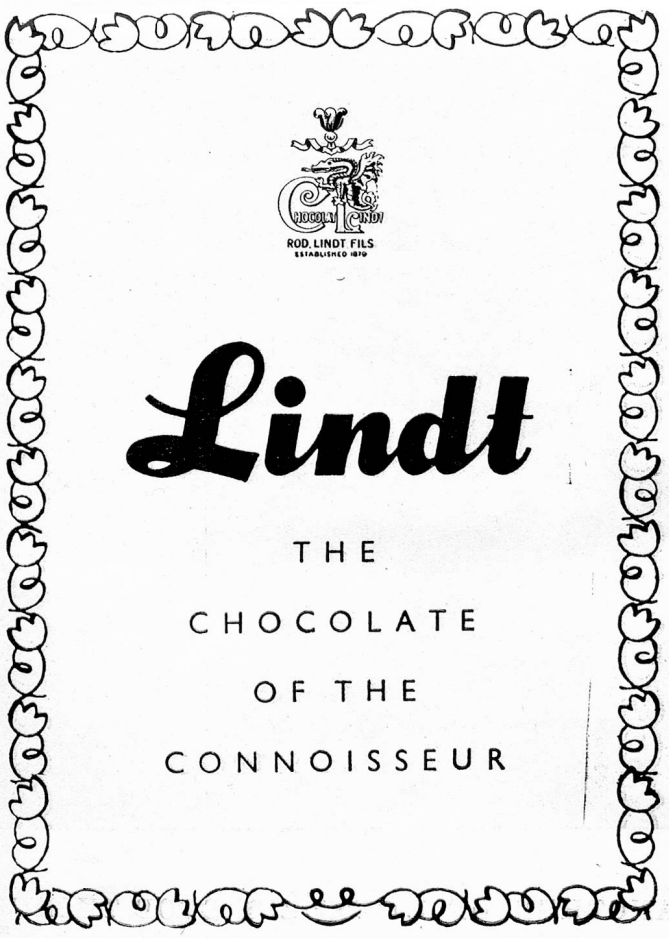
sorts. Of these affairs, peace, arbitration, disarmament, sanctions, protection of minorities, supervision of mandates, plebiscites, financial rehabilitation, economic relations, public health, opium, were continuously and often very usefully debated. But even before the very first Assembly which met in Geneva in November 1920, it had become obvious that not one of its member states believed that it would prove able and even willing to enforce peace. Not one looked upon it as the prime protector of its members' "territorial integrity and existing political independence" which, under Article 10 of the Covenant, they had all assumed the solemn obligation "to respect and preserve as against external aggression". In fact, one of the most straining proposals made at that first Assembly was that moved by Canada on December 5, 1920, to the effect "that Article 10 of the Covenant of the League of Nations be and is hereby struck out".


What had happened in the course of the few months that separated the acceptance and repudiation of this vital provision? Nothing that affected it directly, except the withdrawal of the United States.

With American participation, Article 10 might well have shown the way to an effectively guaranteed peace. Without that participation, it immediately and very generally came to be regarded not only as inapplicable, but as positively dangerous. As a member of the League, the United States would have been bound as all others to cooperate in the blockade of any aggressor. Given its resources, the threat alone of such action might well have proved decisive. As a non-member, on the contrary, it would not only not be expected to coerce a would-be aggressor, but with its well-known traditional insistence on neutral rights, it might quite possibly have opposed any attempt to sever its relations with the outside world.

Also, no one was surprised that the motion to delete Article 10 should have been made by Canada. Assuredly there was and there is in the whole world no state whose intentions are more pacific. But geographic considerations make it obvious that there is also none which could with less equanimity consider the consequences to itself of an international undertaking which might embroil it with its all-powerful neighbour.

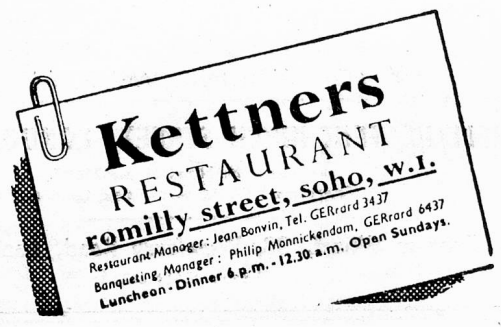
As it happened, Article 10 was not formally struck out of the Covenant, but it was officially interpreted into insignificance. The result was the same. By refusing to join the League, the United States, besides weakening it by non-cooperation, deprived it of the




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effective support of all its members. Thus the feeling of world solidarity which animated the international community on the morrow of the first World War, in itself already of doubtful viability, received a death blow from the recalcitrancy of the very state which had done more than all others to set up the League of Nations.

No orchestra can be expected to produce a successful concert when it is left in the lurch by its conductor on the eve of its first appearance. This is especially so when the conductor had played a leading part in composing its programme.

What is surprising under the circumstances is not that the League failed of its main purpose, but that it lasted for twenty years and that, in the course of that period, its achievements were far from negligible.

Among the most noteworthy contributions to its long quest for peace was perhaps the drafting of the famous Geneva Protocol of 1924.

To be sure, that treaty was in one essential respect even less successful than the Covenant it was intended to perfect. It never came into force. But is served to show the deep interest which the problems of international relations had aroused the world over in the course of a few years of League discussions. And it doubtless has done more than any other instrument, before or since, to stimulate and to enlighten the exploration of the avenues leading to the ultimate goal of guaranteed international peace.

In order to understand why the League failed to prevent the second World War, it is not at all necessary to study its whole career, interesting and instructive as that would be. It is, in my opinion, quite sufficient to recall why the desertion of the United States prevented the Covenant from really coming into force, and why the ensuing reticence of many other states, such as the United Kingdom, prevented the realisation of the aspirations of the eminent statesmen and lawyers who drafted the Protocol of 1924.

In saying that today I almost feel that I owe an apology to those of my hearers, if any, who might remember how active I was in my more youthful years in favour of the League. Might they not be tempted to think that I have changed my views about it in the light of subsequent events? Not as an apology — on that score at least I honestly believe that I cannot fairly be accused of any pharisaical wise hindsight — but merely as an explanation, I venture to quote a few sentences from lectures I delivered in the Institute

of Politics in Williamstown in 1925. In those talks, which I gave mainly to make Americans realize their international responsibilities, I said:

“ The League as established under the Covenant, interpreted as we have seen, is a loose association of sovereign states which have agreed not to go to war themselves if they can avoid it and to repress the violence of others in the common interest of peace, if they should deem it expedient and consonant with their national interest to do so. If the Protocol were ever substituted for the Covenant, the League would become, if not a perfect super-state, at least a close international community of which each member had deliberately sacrificed an appreciable part of his independence on the altar of general peace. It would then and then only have become a true League uncompromisingly to outlaw war and effectively to enforce peace.

It should be obvious to all those who prefer clear thinking and frank speaking to the declamatory, demagogical, or diplomatic expression of vague and fanciful notions, that the existence of such a League is conceivable only if built upon the ruins of the current dogma of untrammelled national sovereignty. The wonder is not, that under existing political conditions, such a League should not exist, but that it should have been possible to bring the representatives of some fifty nations to recommend its creation ‘to the earnest attention’ of their governments, as they unanimously agreed to do in Geneva on October 2, 1924.”

In order to understand why the League failed

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it is not, I venture to repeat, necessary to recall all the incidents of its prolonged but unequal struggle against the forces which made for war.

There is, however, one feature of that struggle which it is well to remember because of the light it throws, not only on the evolution of the past but also on the state of the present and the prospects for the future.

On December 7, 1915, President Wilson, in the course of an address delivered to show his still neutral country the need for military preparedness, declared :

“Great democracies are not belligerent. They do not seek or desire war. Their thought is of individual liberty and of the free labour that supports life and the uncensored thought that quickens it. Conquest and dominion are not in our reckoning, or agreeable to our principles.”

Never was the wisdom of that statement more clearly vindicated than in the history of the League of Nations. After it had already been mortally weakened by the recalcitrancy of the most powerful free country of the day, in 1919, its life was embittered and its end was hastened by the policies of Fascist Italy, of Nazi Germany, of imperialistic Japan and finally of Communist Russia.

I am not one of those given to discovering permanent sociological laws in the tumultuous course of human events. But, especially in considering the evolution of the League, it would seem hard to deny or even to question the causal relations existing between the internal régimes of nations and their foreign policies. Political freedom within seems to make for love of peace without as surely as dictatorships tend to be or to become militaristic. Peace and freedom are as naturally bound together as are war and autocracy. This is so both because free peoples instinctively hate war and because they have learnt that peace between nations is a necessary condition of liberty within. For that very reason, absolute rulers need war or at least international tension in order to maintain their grip on their subjects.

In so far as it can be said that the League of Nations ever really prospered, it did so thanks to the support and under the leadership of democratic nations, Britain, the members of her Commonwealth, France, Weimar Germany, Holland, Belgium and the other smaller liberal countries of Europe. It always had its difficulties with police states such as Fascist Italy, Poland, Spain and others. When Germany

went Nazi, she flouted and shortly left the League. When Italy felt that she no longer had anything to fear from Geneva, she invaded Ethiopia, thus hoping to feed its freedom-starved people on bounteous rations of military glory. The League stories of Japan, and finally of Soviet Russia are not dissimilar.

Thus the history of the League would seem to teach a double lesson. First, in order to succeed, an international organization for the prevention of war must be assured of the full support of at least all the principal peace-loving nations. And, secondly, it must realize that it has nothing to hope, but on the contrary everything to fear, from autocratic régimes who deny their people the political freedom without which there can be no assurance of peace in the world.

(To be continued.)

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