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The 'Failure' of the League of Nations and the Beginnings of the UN

Usually, historical comparisons between the **League of Nations** and its successor the United Nations emphasise the contrasts between the two organisations rather than their similarities. This tendency is understandable when viewed from the perspective of 1945 when the UN came into existence. The view of the League held almost universally at that time was one of weakness and failure. The League had not performed the function that it had been created for: the prevention of a second world war. Now, in the aftermath of that conflict a new organisation was being forged to succeed where its discredited predecessor had failed. This negative attitude towards the League was natural, but it was also driven by political calculation. In order to sell the idea that the League of Nations should actually *have* a successor to a sceptical, war-hardened world, the United Nations had to be presented as something new and historically unique. It could not be allowed to carry the taint of failure that too close an association with the League would have placed on it. Yet in reality the League of Nations provided the blueprint for the new institution. The organisation of the United Nations, its broad political structure and of course its fundamental *raison d'être* within the international system, were all essentially drawn from the template of the League.

League of Nations: Global organisation formed after the First World War which was the precursor to the United Nations; became largely irrelevant in the larger currents of international relations after the mid-1930s and was formally wound up in 1946.

A NEW WORLD ORDER?

The League of Nations, whatever its ultimate fate, had been a profoundly innovative, indeed radical, departure in international relations. This was a reality which only came to be properly acknowledged at the end of the century of the League's creation; for succeeding decades after its disappearance the League continued to be regarded in the popular memory as a by-word for empty rhetoric and diplomatic hypocrisy. Despite this, it eventually provided

Inter-governmentalism: International organisation based on institutions within which states cooperate without surrendering significant parts of their national sovereignty; the UN is in most respects an inter-governmental organisation but the collective security articles of its Charter do involve some significant qualifications of sovereignty.

the model not just for the United Nations but for almost all of the major **inter-governmental organisations** whose growth was to be such a prominent feature of twentieth-century international politics. The League's basic organisation, consisting of an 'executive' Council of the big powers and a 'parliamentary' Assembly of all its country members, both managed by an international civil service, was in essence a bold transposition of national constitutional arrangements to the international environment. Like many seminal ideas, of course, this approach to the organisation of international institutions has come with familiarity to be seen as something obvious and routine. But in the context of a post-First World War world where there was a natural tendency to look backwards to the pre-catastrophic certainties of the nineteenth century, the League had set out a truly novel manifesto for a new international politics. The fundamental logic of the League's structure, once the shock of the new had been absorbed, became so deeply embedded in the political consciousness that any successor organisation would naturally tend towards the same basic architecture.

The purposes of the League, or at any rate those envisioned by its American planners and their supporters, were also startlingly new. Responsibility for the security and defence of all member countries was, as far as possible, to be removed from those countries themselves. The fears and insecurities which had generated the arms races and aggressive alliances that evidently lay at the root of the catastrophe of 1914–18 would be alleviated by the construction of nothing less than a new world order. National security and therefore international security would now, the visionaries of the League proposed, become the collective responsibility of the world community working through the structures of its new global organisation. Again, this new '**multilateralism**' was both strikingly bold and somehow obvious, and the basic idea outlived the League itself.

Multilateralism: Commitment to collective, institutional responses to international challenges through the UN or other organisations (rather than unilateral ones by individual states).

MANAGING POST-WAR ADJUSTMENT

During its first decade the League of Nations made a hugely valuable contribution to the management of the post-war international system. Throughout the 1920s it provided mediation in border disputes at various times between such neighbours as Finland and Sweden, Yugoslavia and Albania, and Hungary and Czechoslovakia. It had also initiated what were in effect international peacekeeping operations.

One such force was deployed in the disputed Saar territory between France and Germany. In the aftermath of the war the predominantly German Saar was removed from Berlin's control and 'internationalised' pending a future act of self-determination. This arrangement was itself an achievement

for the new international values represented by the League. Initially, France had intended simply to annex the heavily industrialised territory as both punishment and reparation for the damage inflicted on its own industry by Germany's war of aggression. Instead the French government was prevailed on to accept the economic benefits of the Saar but with the territory placed under a League of Nations administration until 1935. At that date permanent sovereignty over the Saar would be determined by a popular vote of its inhabitants. This was in effect the precursor to the UN's provision of temporary administrations in such disputed regions as West New Guinea in the 1960s and East Timor and Kosovo at the end of the century. Intriguingly, though, in the case of the Saar the 'final status' options included the future government of the territory by the League of Nations itself in perpetuity, a radical choice never offered subsequently by the UN. In the event, the 1935 plebiscite – policed by a peacekeeping force composed of British, Italian, Dutch and Swedish troops – resulted in an overwhelming vote for a return to German sovereignty [Doc. 1, p. 116]. Almost one in ten of those voting, however, would have preferred to remain 'citizens of the League'.

An international administration and security force also controlled Danzig (the modern-day Polish city of Gdansk) which was removed from German administration and declared a Free City, a status it maintained until it was forcibly reintegrated into Germany by the Nazis in 1939. Elsewhere the League or other multinational agencies supervised and policed with international forces **plebiscites** designed to settle fraught post-war border issues on the basis of national self-determination (Walters, 1960).

The League also brought a new moral sensibility to the question of colonialism when, instead of the colonies of the defeated powers in 1918 simply being transferred to the victors, they were made the responsibility of the League which '**mandated**' their administration and responsibility for their eventual self-determination to appropriate member states. This system was not without its difficulties, and in a number of cases led directly or indirectly to United Nations peace operations later in the century. This was the case in South West Africa (Namibia) which was mandated from Germany to South Africa, and in both Rwanda and Burundi which passed from German imperial rule to be mandated to Belgium. Nevertheless, the new system (inherited as 'Trusteeship' by the United Nations), marked a clear advance on the post-conflict values of the past.

Plebiscite: Popular vote (or referendum) often used to establish the political future of a designated territory (thus embodying the principle of self-determination).

Mandate system: League of Nations innovation whereby the colonies of the defeated powers in the First World War were 'mandated' to the victors not as acquisitions but as responsibilities to be prepared for self-determination; replaced by the UN Trusteeship system.

THE BREAKDOWN OF THE COLLECTIVE IDEA

Despite these bright prospects, a fatal fissure quickly opened at the heart of the new institutionalism. The United States – in the person of President

Woodrow Wilson – had driven the planning of the League as part of the Versailles Treaty negotiations. Ultimately, however, the US Congress refused to ratify American membership. As a result, responsibility for the direction of the new organisation passed from those whose vision had guided its construction to the more diplomatically conservative Europeans like Britain and France.

In time it became clear that the nature of international relations in the 1920s would be in sharp contrast with that of the following decade. By the early 1930s the international environment had begun to change. The ‘post-traumatic’ calm of the immediate post-war years now gave way to a new instability. Territorial and ideological revisionism on the part of states which for various reasons rejected the post-Versailles status quo challenged the principles of the League whose origins were inextricably tied to that settlement. It seemed that the ‘successes’ of the League in soothing the international system of the 1920s perhaps had more to do with the character of the system than the actions of the organisation. And, it must be said, the League itself, or at least its leading members, bore some responsibility for the emerging tensions within the system. Not only had the League of Nations been born of the Versailles treaty, which had become an object of hate for some and disappointment for others, but in its first years it had denied membership to a number of key powers, most importantly Germany and the Soviet Union. Their eventual admission could not eradicate their sense of exclusion from the system which the League sought to manage.

In this deteriorating climate the capacity of the League to translate collective security from theory into a practical tool of international relations was now put under severe test. It was a test that the organisation – or more correctly the dominant powers within it – ultimately failed. The League’s **collective security** plans were outlined in article 10 of its Covenant, its basic constitutional document [**Doc. 2, p. 117**]. Joint measures were to be taken to preserve the territorial integrity of member states ‘against external aggression’. Tellingly, however, the actual means by which this was to be done were left vague. The League Council had the responsibility to advise on methods to be employed when necessary. The strongest instrument of enforcement which members were supposedly required to apply on the ‘direction’ of the Council was economic sanctions. The Council might ‘recommend’ military action but members were under no obligation to comply, according to article 16 of the Covenant (Archer, 2001). On the rare occasions when economic sanctions were implemented by the League, many members simply declined to participate in them. In this way Italy’s aggression against the African state of **Abyssinia** (Ethiopia) in 1935 went effectively unpunished. A range of sanctions were agreed belatedly, but they were disregarded by member states which for political or economic reasons did not wish to confront the Fascist regime in Rome (Armstrong, 1982).

Collective security: The multilateral maintenance of international security (based on the United Nations or other international body) rather than by sectional actions on the part of individual states or competing military alliances.

Abyssinia: Older name of present-day Ethiopia; invaded by Italy in 1935.

Earlier, in 1931, the League had been even more passive in the face of Japan's naked aggression against China in Manchuria. For the big European powers in the League Council this conflict in a remote part of Asia was simply not important enough in the calculation of their own national interests to justify any robust action.

In both these cases the central weakness in the concept of collective security in a world of sovereign states was exposed. However high-minded and idealistic the original conception of the League presented by Woodrow Wilson at Versailles, older and harsher realities governed the behaviour of the states which now dominated the institution (Williams, 2007). States like Britain and France had traditionally conducted their foreign policies on the basis of narrowly defined national interests. The calculation of these interests rarely went beyond considerations of the physical security of the state and its economic well-being (Bennett, 1994). In this sense the international system of the 1930s was, as international relations theorists would put it, highly 'realist' and 'state-centric'. The more generous vision of national interest as best safeguarded by a just and secure global system – the conception at the heart of collective security thinking – simply did not progress during the life of the League.

In the dangerous international conditions of the 1930s the League retreated from the ethical high ground it originally tried to occupy. The terrible fate of China at the hands of Japan featured hardly at all when the powers which made up the League Council made their separate calculations of national interests. Italy, being closer to the centre of a still predominantly European international system, was more problematic – but not much. As a result, in the second half of the 1930s as the world stumbled towards another general war the League became marginalised in global politics. National security remained, as it always had been, the responsibility of the individual state and its alliance partners. Once again a cycle of world conflict would precede a new attempt to reconstruct international security on a multilateral basis. As we have emphasised already, though, the new project did not begin from a *tabula rasa*. The model and the experience of the League was there to be drawn on, even if those utilising it for the new body were reluctant to acknowledge the fact (Northedge, 1985).

THE WAR-TIME ORIGINS OF THE UN

The concept of the United Nations developed by stages after the United States entered the war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Already, however, in the previous August, a meeting had

Atlantic Charter: Anglo-American declaration of August 1941 setting out joint aspirations for the post-war international system including the creation of a new collective security system.

taken place between President Franklin Roosevelt and the British prime minister Winston Churchill on board a warship off the Canadian coast. Here the idea of a collective security system for the future post-war world was resurrected. The '**Atlantic Charter**' which came out of this insisted that 'all nations of the world, for realistic as well as spiritual reasons must come to the abandonment of the use of force'. To this end it spoke of 'the establishment of a . . . permanent system of general security' [**Doc. 3, p. 118**]. By the beginning of 1942 the twenty-six anti-Axis powers had committed themselves to this declaration and themselves had begun to describe their military alliance as the 'United Nations'. During the remaining years of the war, ideas for the new peacetime organisation developed. They did so, of course, under difficult circumstances. The overriding priority for the allied states was the pursuit of victory. This was the obvious prerequisite for the implementation of any post-war blueprint. Too much speculation on the nature of the new international system would have been a misuse of political energies. Additionally, Roosevelt, who like his First World War predecessor Woodrow Wilson a quarter of a century earlier was at the forefront of thinking about the new institution, was anxious to avoid a repeat of the isolationist backlash at home which had kept America out of the League by focusing too much on its proposed successor.

Nevertheless, ideas began to emerge. Roosevelt's initial thoughts centred on the management of security by the big allied powers after the end of the war: the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union and, perhaps, China (Boyd, 1971). This would be made possible by the generalised disarmament of the other states in the international system which would entrust their national security to the collective. Churchill had a more sceptical European perspective on the feasibility of this plan. He was less confident that the necessary cooperation could be achieved and maintained among the big powers. From a more traditionalist perspective he was convinced that states would continue to define their national interests in the same narrow way that had undermined the League's attempts to implement the earlier plan for collective security. Certainly, the participation of the United States in the new arrangements would be a positive advance, but it would be unlikely to alter the basic approach to national foreign and defence policies ingrained in the attitudes of national leaders across the world. More positively, Churchill was also anxious to avoid the marginalisation of the smaller and middle-sized powers which was implicit in Roosevelt's proposals. The prime minister's evolving view was that a strong European dimension should be central to post-war Britain's external relations. As the two world wars had both begun in the centre of Europe, it was not perhaps blindly Eurocentric to seek global solutions in a new system of relationships there. He therefore favoured a new organisation with a predominantly regional rather than global structure. The

new body should, ideally, be one in which loose worldwide arrangements acted as an umbrella for strong local inter-governmental institutions (Luard, 1982).

At the **Tehran Conference** in November 1943, when the tide of the war was clearly turning in the allies' favour, the Soviet Union was brought fully into the debate. Joseph Stalin was now presented with the American idea of the 'four policemen' (the major allied powers) acting as a global coalition able to deploy military **enforcement** powers at the head of a world assembly. The Soviet leader, like Churchill, was wary of the concentration of power in so few hands and initially shared the British preference for a strong regional dimension to any new security regime. However, Roosevelt warned Stalin that American public opinion, still touched by isolationist attitudes, might resist US involvement in security commitments determined by local states in other parts of the world. If post-war security was to be regionalised, there was no obvious reason why the United States should concern itself with anything other than the western hemisphere. While such a system might enhance Soviet power in eastern Europe, it would tend to limit it at the global level. In view of this, Stalin moved towards the more centralised conception of the Americans (Luard, 1982).

As in the case of the League, it was the Americans who provided the leadership in the construction of the new organisation and who pursued their conception in the face of the doubts of the other key actors. On both occasions this situation was no more than a reflection of the balance of power among the respective sets of allies. There was, of course, an irony in this: while the collective security project was designed to remove dangerous national power competition from international relations, it was reliant on the dominating national power of its architect.

It was therefore largely an American plan that was put forward for discussion when allied representatives met to deal with the specifics of the proposed post-war organisation in 1944. Meetings took place in between August and October at **Dumbarton Oaks**, an estate on the edge of Washington, DC. The key negotiators here were the Soviet and British ambassadors to the United States, Andrei Gromyko and Sir Alexander Cadogan, and the American assistant secretary of state, Edward Stettinius, who acted as chairman. Representatives of Nationalist China were also present, though they had a lesser role in the planning process. The objective of the Dumbarton Oaks talks was to reach a consensus among the four powers and then to present the wider anti-Axis alliance with an agreed blueprint for a new global organisation.

Agreement was quickly reached on the basic institutional form of the United Nations, largely because the outline model of the League was available to be exploited. There would be a Security Council of eleven members.

Tehran Conference: Meeting of allied leaders in November 1943 in the capital of Iran, at which early ideas for the creation of a post-war global organisation were discussed.

Enforcement measures: Military action designed to secure a predetermined outcome against an aggressor; contrasts with peacekeeping which seeks to manage conflicts rather than force a particular conclusion to them.

Dumbarton Oaks: Washington venue for the planning of the new United Nations by representatives of the major allied powers between August and October 1944.

(This would be increased to fifteen in the early 1960s to reflect the changing size and membership profile of the organisation.) The Council was to consist of the five big anti-Axis powers: the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, China and France (now admitted as a 'fifth policeman'). These would be permanent members, each with the power of **veto** over Council decisions. In addition, six (later ten) non-permanent members without power of veto would be appointed on a rolling basis from the various regions of the world represented in the organisation. All member states of the United Nations would have a seat in its General Assembly. Both the Council and the Assembly would be serviced by a secretariat of international civil servants.

Veto: The power held by each of the five permanent members in the Security Council individually to prevent action being taken on any non-procedural matter with which it might disagree regardless of the position of the majority.

A nascent system of collective security was also approved at Dumbarton Oaks. In outline this envisaged that disputes between members would in the first instance be settled by processes of negotiation, mediation and conciliation. If these failed, the problem would become the responsibility of the Security Council which would propose its own settlement terms. If this also failed, then the Council could apply economic and other sanctions against the 'aggressor' with, in the last resort, recourse to military action. All members of the United Nations would be required to commit themselves legally to undertake such action on the instructions of the Security Council. The Council would itself be advised on the strategic and operational aspects of these measures by a **Military Staff Committee (MSC)** made up of senior military representatives of its permanent members (Russell, 1958; Yoder, 1997).

MSC: Military Staff Committee, composed of the chiefs of staff of the five permanent members of the Security Council responsible under article 47 of the UN Charter for control of military enforcement actions; never properly operational.

Despite these quite wide areas of agreement among the powers, significant points remained at issue after Dumbarton Oaks. Some of these were essentially technical. There was dispute over the extent of the commitments to be required of UN members and the nature of preparedness and earmarking of national forces for UN service. More ominously, a profoundly important issue remained unresolved: the voting system in both General Assembly and Security Council which, by extension, touched on the question of national representation.

In the case of the General Assembly the Soviet Union sought representation for all sixteen of the constituent republics of the USSR. This would obviously have been a misuse of the concept of 'sovereign equality' on which the UN was to be based – the principle that all independent states in the international system should have equal rights and powers. The Soviet Union itself and not its component parts was obviously the sovereign power. But the Soviet position was in some ways understandable. Although the world had yet to fall into the extremes of cold war **bipolarity** between capitalist west and communist east, the rudiments of this global cleavage had been present virtually since the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. It did not take any great prescience on the part of Stalin and his representatives at Dumbarton

Bipolarity: The configuration of the international system in two dominant, ideologically opposed blocs (or poles); characteristic of the cold war period.

Oaks to see east–west divisions as a major feature of the post-war international system – and therefore of the new global organisation. The Soviet Union was at this time at an obvious disadvantage in terms of simple political arithmetic. The Dumbarton Oaks talks were held before the creation of the so-called 'people's democracies' of eastern Europe and therefore of a communist bloc. The process of European decolonisation which would change completely the composition of the United Nations was even further in the future. From the perspective of 1944–45 the USSR would obviously be ideologically isolated in the new organisation.

The idea of sovereign equality had a certain moral force in an international system where states were personified as strong and weak individuals. In a world based on collectively secured 'justice', the rights of the weak should obviously be as great as those of the strong. But the international system was in reality composed of sovereign states with hugely divergent sizes of population and territory. In this real world, sovereign equality could be seen as fundamentally inequitable and 'undemocratic'. Why should El Salvador (another founding member of the UN), say, have the same powers in the global polity as the incomparably larger and more populous Soviet Union?

Beyond the General Assembly there were divisions between the Soviet Union and the other big powers over the Security Council veto and the prerogatives of the five permanent members. There was no disagreement on the basic principle. The delegates at Dumbarton Oaks all agreed that the veto was a necessary mechanism. It was in fact an advance on the voting system operated at the League where unanimity was required before any action could be taken. The proposed UN veto was for the permanent members of the Security Council alone and would only be activated by a negative vote, not merely by abstention or absence. The difficulty which emerged at the talks was over restrictions on its use. The British and Americans argued that the veto should not be available to a permanent member when its own behaviour was the subject of discussion. Aware of its political vulnerability in an overwhelmingly western institution, the Soviet Union insisted that the veto should be an absolute right of the great powers in all Security Council business other than the purely procedural.

Agreement on both these issues eluded the ambassadors at Dumbarton Oaks. Subsequent attempts to settle them in the remaining months of 1944 were also unsuccessful. The search for an agreement now passed up to the allied foreign ministers and heads of government rather than their ambassadors in Washington. In February 1945 a summit meeting took place at **Yalta** on Russia's Black Sea coast. Soviet foreign minister Molotov gave some ground by accepting a restriction on the veto where 'peaceful settlement' rather than collective security 'enforcement' in issues affecting permanent members were under discussion. With rather more difficulty, a compromise

Yalta Conference: Meeting of allied leaders at the Russian Black Sea resort in February 1945 where, among other post-war plans, the proposals which emerged from the Dumbarton Oaks discussions for the new United Nations were discussed at head of government level.

was also reached on the issue of General Assembly representation. It was accepted that the Soviet Union could have two further seats for the republics of Ukraine and Byelorussia. Roosevelt agreed to this only reluctantly, having at one point threatened to demand separate representation for all of the (then) forty-eight states of the United States if Stalin did not give way (Yoder, 1997). These relatively small western concessions, though, were seen as a reasonable price for progress towards the inauguration of the new organisation.

This advance on the plans for the new organisation was reflected in the final communiqué of the Yalta meeting. Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill pronounced that:

We are resolved upon the earliest possible establishment with our allies of a general international organisation to maintain peace and security. We believe that this is essential, both to prevent aggression and to remove the political, economic, and social causes of war through the close and continuing collaboration of all peace-loving peoples.

The foundations were laid at Dumbarton Oaks. On the important question of voting procedure, however, agreement was not there reached. The present Conference has been able to resolve this difficulty.

We have agreed that a conference of United Nations should be called to meet at San Francisco in the United States on April 25, 1945, to prepare the charter of such an organisation, along the lines proposed in the informal conversations at Dumbarton Oaks.

(Yalta Agreement)

In preparation for the San Francisco meeting the presumed permanent members of the new Security Council sent out invitations to fifty states who were then anti-Axis belligerents. This was a status acquired only very recently by some of these countries as the outcome of the war had become plain and the prizes that went with being on the winning side beckoned. This swelled the ranks of founding members, bolstering the ideal of **universality** of membership. The absence of such universality, it will be recalled, had been a major defect of the League system.

Franklin Roosevelt died ten days before the opening of the San Francisco session but his successor, Harry Truman, immediately affirmed his own and America's commitment to the new organisation. This was greeted with relief among many who had feared a repeat of the isolationist spasm which ended American participation at a similar stage in the development of the League. In reality, however, the prevailing trend in American politics in 1944 and 1945 was if anything anti-isolationist. Roosevelt's Democratic administration had already worked to ensure a bipartisan approach with the Republicans in

Universality: The principle of open and comprehensive membership of international organisations (a general characteristic of the United Nations).

Congress. Edward Stettinius, who had led the Dumbarton Oaks talks, had been elevated to the post of secretary of state. He now cooperated closely with the Republicans' principal foreign affairs adviser (and future secretary of state), John Foster Dulles, who accepted an invitation to participate in the San Francisco conference (Divine, 1974).

Driven on by the 'big five', whose authority was enhanced by their leadership of the huge military alliance poised on the verge of final victory in mid-1945, the San Francisco conference (held in the city's Opera House) confirmed the decisions taken at Dumbarton Oaks and Yalta. The structure of the institution, familiar in outline to most of the participants from their League experience, was accepted without dissent. Similarly, the basic constitution of the United Nations, its Charter, was adopted with only marginal and technical modifications. Having been ratified by the five governments of the permanent members, the Charter came into force and the United Nations became a political and legal reality on 24 October 1945.

