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PROJECT

Reconsidering the League of Nations

I plan to write a new history of the League of Nations for a broad readership. My purpose in doing so is twofold. On the one hand, I wish to foster public interest in, and awareness of, an institution about which most people (especially in the United States) know little; on the other, I hope to revise the rather negative scholarly verdict on the League by drawing attention to its work establishing international norms and networks. True, the League's capacity to fulfill the extravagant promises of security and arbitration contained in its Covenant was only as great as its dominant members' wills, but its achievements in the realms of regulation of drugs, trafficking and other hazards, and the articulation of international standards of health, welfare, and colonial governance were more substantial. And as an engine for publicity, political exposure, political legitimation, and political learning, its powers were great indeed: small nations, would-be nations, dispossessed or oppressed minorities, and the advocates of such marginal groups as slaves or children learned the skills of petitioning and lobbying before the commissions and committees of the League. Especially today, when skepticism about international institutions runs high and international organizations are hard pressed, I feel it is important to recover this early history of internationalism.

Recommended Reading

Pedersen, Susan. *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

- . *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004.

- . "Settler Colonialism at the Bar of the League of Nations." In *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Susan Pedersen and Caroline Elkins. New York: Taylor & Francis, forthcoming Oct. 2005.

COLLOQUIUM, 29.11.2005

Reconsidering the League of Nations

By a circuitous route, I've come to a project - really, two linked projects - on the history of the League of Nations.

For fifty years after its demise, the League of Nations received little scholarly attention. Having failed to cope with the successive security challenges of the 1930s, the League's system of collective security was dismissed as a foolish (if idealistic) dream and the institution itself as a failure. Insofar as voters and publics in today's globalized world have any awareness of the League, they share this negative view. When Donald Rumsfeld wants to charge the United Nations with political ineffectiveness or woolly idealism, all he need do is to liken it to the League of Nations.

I first stumbled across the League while researching interwar British social and colonial policy, and, to my own surprise, discovered it to have had an influence and reach quite out of keeping with this negative assessment. A few years ago, then, I began investigating the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League, a project aimed at tracing the impact of mandatory oversight and the associated ideology of "trusteeship" on global ideals and practices of colonial administration. I discovered, however, that I was not the only historian to have rediscovered the League. The demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar balance of power unleashed processes of ethnic and national boundary-making reminiscent of the period after 1918; in this environment, the League's systems of minority protection, mandatory oversight and refugee administration drew renewed attention. As archives opened, historians also grew more aware of the extent to which international norms and practices in areas ranging from child welfare to international drug control to the regulation of radio frequencies grew out of the efforts and innovations of the League.

Drawing on my own research and on new work in these other areas, I aim to write a new, one-volume history of the League. I am in the early stages of this project, and have been spending my time so far reading through the minutes of the Directors' Meetings of the League Secretariat (I have to do that at the FU-that's why I'm missing a lot of lunches) and through scholarly studies of the League's various international regulatory regimes.

I plan to use this talk (1) to explain how my earlier research led me to question received wisdom about the League, (2) to tell you a bit about the League's history, structure and working, and (3) to offer some tentative arguments about its historical significance. Briefly, I think that significance lies in the way the League opened up political space for claim-making by new actors (e.g. new or would-be states, voluntary or humanitarian organizations, ethnic groups), legitimized new international practices (petitioning, international fact-finding, etc.) and promoted the elaboration of new international norms. The League's security system had crumbled by 1936 and the League itself was formally dissolved in 1946, but our own noisy world of international claim-making and regulation is in many ways built on its foundation.

EVENINGCOLLOQUIUM

26.04.2006

Die heilige Aufgabe der Zivilisation Das Mandatssystem des Völkerbunds in neuem Licht Abendkolloquium

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Pedersen, Susan ([s.l.],2006)

Eine heilige Aufgabe der Zivilisation? : Das Mandatssystem des Völkerbundes im neuen Licht

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=669195863>

Pedersen, Susan (Oxford,2007)

Back to the League of Nations

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1683931831>

Pedersen, Susan (2007)

Eine heilige Aufgabe der Zivilisation : das Mandatssystem des Völkerbunds in neuem Licht

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=670706094>

Pedersen, Susan (2005)

Settler colonialism at the bar of the league of nations

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=615554083>

Pedersen, Susan (New York, NY [u.a.],2005)

Settler colonialism in the twentieth century : projects, practices, legacies

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=471303291>

Pedersen, Susan (New Haven, Conn. [u.a.],2004)

Eleanor Rathbone and the politics of conscience

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Society and sexes in the modern world

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=372324185>

Pedersen, Susan (Cambridge [u.a.],1995)

Family, dependence, and the origins of the welfare state : Britain and France, 1914 - 1945

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