The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire

Review Number: 1900

Publish date: Thursday, 3 March, 2016

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ISBN: 9780199570485

Date of Publication: 2015

Price: £18.62

Pages: 592pp.

Publisher: OUP Oxford

Publisher url: <http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199570485.do>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Peter Yearwood

Susan Pedersen's title misleads. The unwary might think that it deals generally with the League and imperialism, centring on the well-known paradox that an institution created primarily to ensure stability in Europe was undermined and then effectively destroyed by its failure to stop imperialist aggression in Asia and Africa. While the book does touch on this, its focus is much narrower: on the mandatory system, and particularly on the work of the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC). Yet anyone lured into the book by the title will soon feel not cheated, but amply rewarded. The book is important and deals with an important, hitherto understudied, theme. Dr Pedersen notes the emergence of a new history of the League of Nations over the past decade. Historians now look at the League 'with new eyes' (p. 5). She has done much herself to stimulate this. *The Guardians* consolidates her leadership position in the field. It is one of the still regrettably few books on the League which I would unhesitatingly recommend to a non-specialist, and also a major contribution to the much more written-on topic of 20th-century imperialism.

To begin with, *The Guardians* is very well written, with clarity and precision, compelling themes and illuminating detail. With re-reading, its pedagogic tone does grate a bit. Well formulated questions are asked, and promptly answered. We are repeatedly enjoined to recall and remember points and persons. But this is far better than having to struggle through thickets of jargon-strewn prose in pursuit of ill thought-out ideas. Dr Pedersen always knows where she is going, and she takes us there efficiently. Her research is exemplary, using the League records in Geneva and governmental and non-governmental archives across five continents ([1](#)), as well as the full range of secondary sources on each of the 12 mandated territories. While some historians treat other historians as competitors whose errors must be exposed and corrected, Dr Pedersen is much more inclined to see them as co-workers whose contributions should be acknowledged. As a result, *The Guardians* is authoritative without being combative.

The book's field is wide, covering the mandates in the Middle East (Palestine, Syria, and Iraq), Africa (Togo, Cameroons, Tanganyika, Ruanda/Burundi, and South West Africa), and the Pacific (Western Samoa, New Guinea, Nauru, and the Japanese Mandated Islands), necessarily highlighting those issues which provoked discussion and controversy, what Dr Pedersen calls 'talk', at Geneva. In line with the emerging historiography she is sensitive to the dynamics of the League as an organisation, and to the politics and personalities of the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC), which she knows intimately and sets out

vividly. As with Patricia Clavin's recent book on the League's Economic and Financial Organisation (2), we are introduced to a cast of characters who are mentioned in passing, but usually not at all, in the authoritative works of earlier generations, such as F. P. Walters's semi-official history.(3) Some of these played important parts. The British member, Lord Lugard, set out the principle of a 'dual mandate' which largely defined the Commission's aims. The Dutchman Daniel Van Rees, though 'a great nuisance and no doubt a great bore ...', was recognised as trustworthy and impartial by his colleagues, and was largely responsible for establishing 'the principle that mandatory powers were 'not sovereign' in the mandated territories' (p. 206). Pedersen considers that forcing the mandatory powers 'to accept, however grudgingly, that norm was the most significant achievement of the mandates system' (p. 231). By contrast, the Italian Marquis Theodoli was seen as an intriguer, but he established that in principle (though not in Palestine) native rather than settler interests had to be put first, and, where possible, he ensured that petitions were passed to those of his colleagues most likely to be sympathetic. One may note in passing that his broadly liberal approach paralleled that of Pietro Stoppani in the Financial and Economic Organisation, suggesting that a useful study might be done of Italian policy towards the League in the years when Mussolini projected himself as one of the pillars of world peace.

However, the strength of *The Guardians* lies not just in its geographical range and mastery of detail, but mainly in the cogency of its analysis of important questions. Pedersen looks at the League and at the Commission as arenas of contention, and as bodies that changed and evolved. She recognises that international agreements such as mandates 'become meaningful, and gain force through iteration and concession, when states, against a narrow conception of their interest, but in order to gain legitimacy and repute, profess their allegiance and change course' (p. 232). The mandatory system had been established by men who believed that imperial rivalries, driven by economic imperatives, were a major cause of war. Many of these were Britons who hoped to raise other powers' colonial administrations up to the level of the British Empire. They believed in a civilising mission. As Lady Lugard agreed in a discussion with Theodoli and the Belgian Pierre Orts, they had to defend 'the best results of western civilisation from the attacks likely enough to be made by degenerate Europeans and inferior races' (p. 107). In the early days Lugard dominated the PMC and British views prevailed, as they also did in the Economic and Financial Organisation. Two practices emerged in the PMC and would endure. While petitions might be accepted, the Commission could examine only whether the mandatory power was applying the terms of the mandate. Petitions from nationalists contesting those terms could not be received. Disturbances in a mandated territory were seen as evidence of laxity. Mandatory administrations were repeatedly enjoined to be firm, often with tragic results, as with the bloody suppression of the Samoan *Mau* in December 1929.

British influence lessened after Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain's ham-fisted attempt to curb the independence of the PMC in 1925. Shortly after, German entry into the League forced the 'most creative period, as the Mandate Commission struggled to articulate norms that might reconcile the revisionist powers to the League regime' (p. 403). That 'talk' became ever more important had consequences. While it changed little on the ground, as Pedersen recognises, it made imperial government 'more burdensome and brought normative statehood nearer' (p. 13). Nevertheless, internationalism failed in the 1930s because its benefits were not so evident to Japan, Italy, and Germany as to incline them to modify their policies. They turned instead to establishing or expanding their own empires. Neville Chamberlain seriously considered offering parts of Central Africa to Germany in a system whereby all colonial powers would administer 'their territories under common economic and humanitarian norms' (p. 344). In Africa as in Europe, he hoped that meeting justified German grievances would bring Germany back into an ethically based international order. Hitler was not much interested in colonies. He would take what he was offered, but he would not subscribe to the norms. What he really wanted was in Europe, and he preferred to take it by force.

The exit of the revisionist powers fatally undermined the mandatory system. The PMC had seldom been effective in changing situations on the ground, either in abolishing forced labour or in preventing mandatory powers from gaining permanent economic advantages. Now it ceased to be useful even to its erstwhile major backers. France transferred the Alexandretta district from its Syrian mandate to Turkey in 1939, using the League Council to override the objections of the Mandates Commission. Great Britain, which had long

deferred to the pro-Zionist majority of the PMC, now found that in Palestine the logic of interest was irresistible and that 'imperial imperatives, and not League doctrine would drive policy' (p. 393). It would no longer be bound by the terms of the mandate, but would instead follow the policy of the White Paper and restrict Jewish immigration.

While, in the twilight of the League, the Economic Organisation could transform itself into a think-tank and move to America, no such useful exit opened for the PMC. The last issue it considered was whether to condemn British and French use of the resources of their mandated territories in the war effort. A meeting set for June 1940 would probably have censured them for this. Events supervened. This last meeting was never held. After the war, when the United Nations Trusteeship Council replaced the PMC, its task would be not to improve imperialism by internationalisation, but to liquidate it by the recognition of new sovereign states.

Although there is much of great value and interest that a review like this has to leave to those whom it encourages to read the book, its exceptional quality should be apparent even from a brief summary. But, while *The Guardians* is an outstanding product of the new history, it still has some of the defects of the earlier one. Pedersen is inclined to present the League as a product of idealism, which she associates with Woodrow Wilson. While she is careful not to link the American president directly with the principle of national self-determination, and recognises that he did not expect the response he got in the non-European world, she does not highlight this in the way she does other points which she considers key. Rather, she claims that he 'promised a new kind of peace, a peace without annexations or indemnities ...' (pp. 23–4). In this she largely follows the approach of Erez Manela (4), an interpretation which has been challenged by Eric D. Weitz as overemphasising Wilson's impact and underplaying 'the importance of the Bolshevik and Soviet use of self determination ...'. (5) Moreover, self-determination cannot be separated from no annexations, no indemnities. Neither came from Wilson, nor from Lenin. Both were part of the formula of the Zimmerwald Conference of minority Socialists in September 1915. While Lenin was at Zimmerwald, he opposed agitation for a negotiated peace, urging instead the transformation of the imperialist war into a revolutionary war. Self-determination was taken up by the All-Russian Soviet in its call for a Stockholm Peace Conference in July 1917. Lenin and the Bolsheviks came round to it only after November Revolution.

The new Soviet Russia called for a general peace treaty on this basis, which was accepted by the Central Powers for the peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk, as they intended to use it to shatter the Russian empire. The Allies had to respond. Lloyd George in his speech of 5 January 1918 insisted that self-determination applied as much outside of Europe as inside. He intended to use the principle to block the restoration of the German colonies to Berlin, which had claimed that the military support it had received from its colonised peoples showed their attachment to German rule. Wilson made his own statement of war aims (the 'Fourteen Points') three days later, mainly because he realised that London envisaged making peace at Russia's expense. He also differed from Lloyd George in refusing to apply self-determination outside of Europe. The interests, but not the wishes, of colonised peoples should be taken into account, but only alongside, and not above, the claims of the colonising powers. In other words, he did not rule out the restoration of the German colonies. While Wilson liberalised American rule in its Philippine colony, devolving significant powers to local élites, he did and said nothing to encourage non-European nationalism. After all, as a small child he had prayed for the victory of the slave-owning Confederacy, and as President he purged black Americans from the federal government. Arriving in Europe in 1919, he had, to the surprise and relief of the British, ignored the appeals of Indians, Egyptians, and even Irish.

The Wilsonian moment may have been real, but Wilson had little to do with it. As far as the non-European world was concerned, it was created against his wishes. The roots of what Pedersen calls Wilsonianism should be sought elsewhere. For instance, explaining the career of William Ormsby-Gore, who was the first British member on the Permanent Mandates Commission, who would much later be Colonial Secretary, and whom we are enjoined to remember, Pedersen simply says he took Wilsonian language 'to heart' (p. 25). It would perhaps have been more pertinent and penetrating to have noted that he was Lord Robert Cecil's brother-in-law, and part of his political grouping in the early 1920s. The new historians have much to say

about how the League worked after 1920, and why it counted in the world. Pedersen is profoundly right in explaining the mandatory system ‘in the interaction between these two dynamics – the play of geopolitical interest and the force of international scrutiny and talk’ (p. 406). As she repeatedly shows, the talk was often racist, and the consequences repressive. That it undermined empire was very much an unforeseen consequence. The mandatory system failed either to transform imperial rule or to reconcile the revisionist powers. Our understanding of the dynamic of these failures is enhanced when we look at the long history of humanitarian justifications for imperialism, and recognise the rootedness of the League in the power-political diplomacy of the First World War and the response of national leaders to the challenge of international socialism.⁽⁶⁾ The potential of the new history is therefore great. We are all in Dr Pedersen’s debt for a book which moves it substantially forward.

Notes

1. The blurb says four continents; I am counting Australasia as a fifth.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Patricia Clavin, *Securing the World Economy; The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (Oxford, 2013).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. F. P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations* (London, 1952).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York, 2007).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Eric D. Weitz, ‘Self-determination: how a German Enlightenment idea became the slogan of national liberation and a human right’, *American Historical Review*, 120, 2 (April 2015), 462–96, quotation at p. 485, n. 91.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Writing this part of the review led me back to the foundational works of the previous generation such as Arno J. Mayer, *Wilson vs. Lenin; Political Origins of the New Diplomacy 1917–1918*, (Cleveland, OH, 1964), N. Gordon Levin Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics; America’s Response to War and Revolution*, (London, 1968), *Woodrow Wilson and a Revolutionary World, 1913–1921*, ed. Arthur S. Link (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982), and Lloyd C. Gardner, *Safe for Democracy, The Anglo-American Response to Revolution, 1913–1923*, (New York, NY, 1984). These are surprisingly weak in their coverage of the non-European world, and, despite their proclaimed themes, fail to acknowledge that, rather than shaping events in accordance with their own ideas, both Wilson and Lenin, as well as Lloyd George, responded reluctantly to principles set out by the Zimmerwald Conference.[Back to \(6\)](#)

The author thanks Professor Yearwood for his review, and does not wish to respond further.

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/06/guardians-league-of-nations-susan-pedersen-review> [2]

Financial Times

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/87ce2b2e-258f-11e5-bd83-71cb60e8f08c.html> [3]

London Review of Books

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n20/ferdinand-mount/parcelled-out> [4]

Times Higher Education

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/book-review-the-guardians-the-league-of-nations-and-the-crisis-of-empire-by-susan-pedersen> [5]

Washington Times

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/oct/4/book-review-the-guardians-the-league-of-nations-an/> [6]

Foreign Affairs

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- [3] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/87ce2b2e-258f-11e5-bd83-71cb60e8f08c.html>
- [4] <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n20/ferdinand-mount/parcelled-out>
- [5] <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/book-review-the-guardians-the-league-of-nations-and-the-crisis-of-empire-by-susan-pedersen> [6] <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/oct/4/book-review-the-guardians-the-league-of-nations-an/> [7] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/2015-12-14/guardians-league-nations-and-crisis-empire>