

The Lights That Failed. European International History, 1919–1933

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International historians have been waiting a long time for this book. Their anticipation of the volume is testimony to the esteem with which Zara Steiner's contribution to the field is held. The good news is that the volume has been worth the wait; the bad news is that the wait is not quite over, for volume two covering the years from 1933 to 1939 is still in production. Researching and writing international history on this scale demands patience from the author and her audience as it is a considerable undertaking. *The Lights that Failed* draws on a variety of archival materials housed in four countries and on a literature published in at least six different languages. While it eschews a recent pre-occupation of the field with the cultural aspects of international diplomacy with its predominate focus on economic and political relations, the array of countries, personalities, themes and events covered is enormous.

One of the great strengths of the book is that it is far more than a history of relations between Europe's great powers. The harsh realities of economic and security politics and the way that both elements challenge the sanctity of national frontiers, meant that Europe's larger powers played the dominant role in European relations in the interwar period. So too did nations that wielded considerable economic power, such as the United States, or strategic influence, such as Japan. But in this volume Steiner makes a major contribution to the field in her treatment of Europe's 'lesser powers', as they were demeaningly called at the time. Scandinavia, particularly the contribution of Norwegian diplomats, Fridtjof Nansen and Christian Lange, and the central and eastern European countries of Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Greece, to give but a few examples, receive far greater attention than they have been given in previous international histories of the period. Steiner's lucid treatment of the what became of the 'broken shards' of the Habsburg Empire will be invaluable to anyone left confused by Margaret MacMillan's account of the impact of *The Peacemakers* on Eastern and Central Europe.

The book's narrative structure makes its ideal for the novice reader, while the lucid and engaging prose ensures that the coverage in its 938 pages is exhaustive not exhausting. The book is divided into two unequally sized parts: the first focusing on Europe's reconstruction in the years between 1918 and 1929, and the second, addressing what Steiner calls the 'hinge years' of 1929–33, that cover the catastrophic impact of the Great Depression, the failure of a Disarmament conference that had been nine years in the planning, and the Manchurian crisis that 'has come to be seen as part of a nationalist upsurge against a western-created form of internationalism' (p.707). The 'hinge years' determined that the doors of Europe that had swung open after the First World War – favouring a reduction of barriers within Europe with regard to the movement of goods, money, people and ideas – slammed firmly shut by 1933.

The book brings together the latest scholarship in the field, an impressive achievement given the length of its

gestation and the range of topics addressed. In her preface, Steiner acknowledges 'the generosity of her fellow historians' as 'quite amazing', but it is also rare to find an established scholar who is so interested in, and determined to understand, what her peers and her students have had to say. The overview of recent historiography in the book makes it invaluable for anyone teaching or studying the period. The chapters on the work of the League of Nations, the failure of disarmament negotiations and the economic diplomacy of the Great Depression best illustrate the thematic and technical range of the book. The League's contribution to the fields of healthcare, 'white-slavery' (read prostitution) and drug control take the reader in a very different direction to the standard pre-occupation with the League's disarmament work that invariably dominates synthetic accounts. The importance of disarmament, however, is not ignored. Indeed, anyone who has struggled to understand the significance of the Geneva Protocol, armament ratios and conference diplomacy need look no further. The book's thematic sub-plots also hold much to interest the advanced student of period.

It is in the thematic sections that the core of Steiner's argument lies. In common with other recent studies of the 1920s, she has sought to draw out that the period is more than pure prelude to the Second World War: 'It was a post-war not a pre-war decade.' (p. 602) Although the First World War was less destructive than the Second World War in terms of lives lost and property destroyed, Steiner argues that the tasks of reconstruction contained opportunities and costs for Europe. After the First World War, the range of economic, social and political challenges combined with the emergence of new national frontiers and power relations forced statesmen, and very occasionally women, to find new solutions to the task of reconstruction. At the same time, many clung to the traditional ideas and diplomatic methods of the past and this often undermined their best efforts.

The phenomenon is best illustrated through the history of League of Nations which was seen to be on the ascent until 1929. Before the First World War states alone were considered to be subject to international law. But the creation of the League inaugurated a new kind of organisation based on international law which, though neither a state nor a federal union, was a legal entity with rights, obligations, institutions, a permanent staff and a budget of its own. It was also open to all nations of the world that met its criteria for membership. There certainly had never been a world body like it before, although the League gathered together a lot of ideas and practises from the past. There was novelty too in the fact that so many problems formerly deemed to be solely of national concern were now considered fit for international discussion. National delegates came to Geneva to consider a huge variety of questions and the hope of League enthusiasts was that national delegates would begin to look beyond the strictly national perspective and act as members of a wider transnational community of global citizens.⁽¹⁾

When it came to the League's central ambition 'to preserve peace from all risk of outrage', however, the League's efforts were constrained by the methods of traditional diplomacy. As a result, the League did not prove to be a substitute for great-power politics, but rather worked as an adjunct to them; indeed, the League's constitution meant it struggled to be more than the sum of its national parts.⁽²⁾ The problems the League faced in making an effective contribution to European peace are amply illustrated in a number of chapters, including an excellent account of the Manchurian Crisis of 1931.

The League of Nations is one of a number of 'lights' Steiner identifies in the international history of the 1920s that, had they remained empowered, would have illuminated paths other than the road to war. Additional positive developments of the period included the Paris Peace Conference's emphasis on democracy, the economic and monetary stabilisation of the mid-1920s and the impact of the Locarno treaties. But, as Steiner's conclusion to part one of the book makes clear, these lights were flickering at best: the extension of democracy was accompanied by the poisoned chalice of self-determination, economic and monetary stabilisation was secured on the flawed operation of the gold standard, and Locarno failed to address the problem of Eastern European security. Steiner could have taken her exploration of 'the lights' further. It would have been interesting to hear how far these positive developments shaped diplomacy beyond the 1920s in, for example, the reconstruction decades of the 1940s and the 1990s.

It would have been valuable too, particularly from a teaching perspective, for Steiner to have placed her account within the established historiography. Her assertion that her book 'rests on the highly unfashionable premise that history is more than a simple expression of opinion about the past' does not reflect the degree to which the author has engaged with new ways of thinking about international history. Her sensitivity to the worlds, imagined and real, within which statesmen and nations operated, to the transnational communities of government advisors who influenced governments, and to questions of gender and ethnicity, identify this book clearly as a product of the twenty-first century. There is also awareness that international encounters are a reflection of domestic social conditions and ideologies. Although Steiner does not speak directly to the current fashion among international historians for describing foreign policy as the cultural product of each country, when relevant she adopts this methodology to great effect. Her reconstruction of Wilson's worldview explains why he could seriously claim to Congress in 1919 that America's mission at the Paris Peace Conference was 'to redeem the world and make it fit for free men like ourselves to live in' (p. 35).

Occasionally, however, Steiner could have paid more attention to her own assumptions. The implied boundaries of Steiner's Europe are interesting, for example, for it they do include Russia (many contemporary commentators would have certainly frowned upon this), but exclude Turkey. How far does the 'Europe' described in this book match representations and expectations of European foreign policy advanced in the interwar period? Were there any distinguishing features when it comes to the foreign policy objectives of European powers compared to those pursued by other parts of the world? Sally Marks has recently defined this period as delineating the 'Ebbing of European ascendancy'; it will be interesting to read Steiner's conclusions in volume two about what the history of European diplomacy in this period tells us about its place in the wider world.⁽³⁾ It is testament to the realities of power-politics of the period that, in contrast to accounts of Europe's international history in the late nineteenth century, Steiner makes so little mention of Africa (except North Africa), Central and South America, and the Indian Sub-continent. The inference is that Europe had become more inward looking.

It is not only on the question of geography that it would have been interesting to see more of the author's reasoning laid bare. At a time when many international history courses are being converted to world history, it would have been fascinating to learn a little more of how the local, national and regional connect to one another in the development of European diplomacy, and how Europe's north, south, east and west related to one another. The history of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s has taught us, for example, that as Eastern European ties to the West have grown stronger, connections within the region itself have weakened, sometimes to damaging effect. Was the same true in the decade of reconstruction of the 1920s?

The final two related questions are the most fundamental and difficult for students and practitioners of diplomacy (and according to current thinking we are all diplomats now): what are the objectives of foreign policy and how should they be met? In other words, what is foreign policy and how is it made? *The Lights That Failed* is very informative as to the ambitions of European countries in their foreign policy, but it would be interesting to learn more about Steiner's views as to why some countries are more successful in the formulation and prosecution of their foreign policy than others. In what ways do the different elements of economic power, military strength, strategic position and political influence determine that one country plays a larger role in fashioning the international history of Europe than another? How far were governments at the mercy of forces, notably the movement of money, goods and diseases, over which they had little control? The account of the 'hinge years' in part two certainly draws out the degree to which both democratic nations and the 'system' of international relations struggled and failed to meet the challenges before them. Do pressure groups, of which there was a considerable variety in the interwar period, play any role at all in shaping the development of international relations? And finally, how important was the quality of leadership in determining the outcome of events? The book contains some wonderful pen portraits of European statesmen of the interwar period who were a much more varied, talented and eccentric group of men than the familiar monochrome photographs of moustached figures in morning suits of the period convey. At key moments, the negotiation of the Locarno treaties and the Lausanne Conference, to give but two examples, their impact was decisive.

The Lights That Failed certainly underlines the idea that it is time to lay to rest the old distinction between diplomatic and international history. Traditionally, international history was seen to privilege, or at least to consider at length, the international environment over the inherently national character of diplomatic history. Although diplomatic history, too, was profoundly shaped by power relations, it often took the structures which determine the questions of international history as a given. This book draws richly on both traditions. It also makes an important challenge to the criticism that both diplomatic and international history have added little to our understanding of the varied connections between nation-states by focusing too much on questions of war and peace.⁽⁴⁾ Although inevitably dominated by the experience of war and peace, Steiner's volume is able to demonstrate, nonetheless, the rich and varied connections that bound European countries to one another and to the wider world.

Notes

1. Andrew Webster, 'The transnational dream: politicians, diplomats and soldiers in the League of Nations' pursuit of international disarmament, 1920–1938', *Contemporary European History*, 14.4 (2005), 493–518.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Patricia Clavin and Jens-Wilhelm Wessels, 'Transnationalism and the League of Nations: understanding the work of its economic and financial organisation', *Contemporary European History*, 14.4 (2005), 465–92.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Sally Marks, *The Ebbing of European Ascendancy. An International History of the World, 1914–1945* (Oxford, 2002).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Kiran Klaus Patel, 'Überlegungen zu einer transnationalen Geschichte', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 52.7 (2004), 626–45, 633.[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author would like to thank Dr Clavin for her incisive review. Some of the questions raised in the review are ones which she hopes to address in the second volume, currently in preparation, where she also intends to comment more extensively on her methodology.

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