UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
University of Birmingham Research at Birmingham

H-Diplo Article Review 1123- “Dissenting Voices: The Secretariat of the League of Nations and the Drafting of Mandates, 1919–1923.”

Jackson, Simon

DOI:
https://hdiplo.org/to/AR1123

License:
Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND)

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Jackson, S 2022, H-Diplo Article Review 1123- “Dissenting Voices: The Secretariat of the League of Nations and the Drafting of Mandates, 1919–1923.”. H-Net. https://doi.org/https://hdiplo.org/to/AR1123

Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal

General rights
Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

•Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
•Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
•User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of ‘fair dealing’ under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
•Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy
While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Download date: 20. Apr. 2024

H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 1123

30 June 2022

Pablo La Porte. "Dissenting Voices: The Secretariat of the League of Nations and the Drafting of Mandates, 1919–1923." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 32:3 (September 2021): 440-463. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2021.1961485.

https://hdiplo.org/to/AR1123

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Thomas Maddux | Production Editor: George Fujii

Review by Simon Jackson, University of Birmingham[1]

Over the last twenty years and especially since 2007, when Susan Pedersen summoned historians "Back to the League of Nations," the historiography on this international organization, with its well-organized and increasingly digitized archives in Geneva, Switzerland, has boomed.[2] Historians working in a wide variety of fields have drawn increasingly on League sources. They have done so to internationalize 'boxy' national or imperial historiographies, or to add a networked or global history dimension to social, political, or intellectual histories of anti-colonial nationalism.[3] Similarly, historians of science, of "development", of migration and refugee rights, of emotions, and of humanitarianism, to name just a few fields, have found significant resources in the League archives. These sources' appeal lies substantially in the way they concentrated data and produced knowledge about many parts of the imperial world order of the 1920s and 1930s, cutting across conventional boundaries and opening the way for fresh interpretations.[4]

---

[1] My thanks to Tehila Sasson for comments on a draft of this review.

[2] Susan Pedersen, "Back to the League of Nations," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (2007): 1091–1117, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40008445.

[3] See for example Sean Andrew Wempe, *Revenants of the German Empire: Colonial Germans, Imperialism, and the League of Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) and Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[4] See for example, in a large literature, Tomoko Akami, "Imperial Polities, Intercolonialism, and the Shaping of Global Governing Norms: Public Health Expert Networks in Asia and the League of Nations Health Organization, 1908–37," *Journal of Global History* 12, no. 1 (2017): 4–25, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022816000310; Philippe Bourmaud, Chantal Verdeil, Norig Neveu, eds., *Experts et expertises dans les mandats de la Société des Nations : figures, champs et outils* (Paris: Presses de l'INALCO, 2020); Mira L. Siegelberg, *Statelessness: A Modern History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020); Ilaria Scaglia, *The Emotions of Internationalism: Feeling International Cooperation in the Alps in the Interwar Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Emily Baughan, *Saving the Children: Humanitarianism, Internationalism, and Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021). For the League Archives, visit https://libraryresources.unog.ch/leagueofnationsarchives.

© 2021 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US

Pedersen's own work, alongside that of leading scholars such as Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, focuses on the discourse and operations of the League itself.[5] Faced with a sprawling organization that evolved over time, these scholars often concentrated on specific parts of it – the Permanent Mandates Commission, in Pedersen's case, or the Economic and Financial Organisation, in Clavin's. Using the tools of political and imperial history, while attending closely to discursive and rhetorical forms of power, they show how the Genevan world of the League became a global and imperial crossroads and thus a locus of political cross-fertilization and a crucible of new political, economic and social norms.[6] At the League, a range of actors, beyond just national or imperial state agents, exercised some influence and sculpted new styles of politics.[7] Thus, Pedersen's book on the League's Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC), the body that oversaw European imperial rule of former German colonies and Ottoman territories, shows that while it remained an unequivocally imperial, European, and white institution, with reflexes and personnel rooted in the nineteenth century, nevertheless its modes of operation, forms of talk and intellectual logics paved the way for the rise of anti-colonial nationalism. The PMC opened opportunities and questions that the League's dominant powers, despite their sway, had not intended.[8] Among those who both engineered and seized those opportunities, insofar as they could, were anti-colonial activists, but also the League's own staff.

Pablo La Porte's recent article in *Diplomacy and Statecraft* makes a fine contribution to this literature. He challenges Pedersen's account by delving with forensic precision into the debate within the League's nascent Secretariat over the drafting of the Mandates system, in the very earliest years of the League's history, 1919-1923. These were years when the more internationalist Wilsonian influence on the League ebbed rapidly, giving way to British imperial dominance of the institution. La Porte's key protagonists are a small coterie of League officials, often jurists and strong believers in the League's potential as a check on imperial power. La Porte focuses on how these European men (all men) resisted this transition towards imperial control as it crystallized in the drafting of the texts and bureaucratic processes that outlined the operation of Mandate rule.

In this tight official world, hierarchies and personalities were vital. La Porte's protagonists worried a great deal about the willingness of the League's Secretary-General and head of its Secretariat, the British diplomat Eric Drummond, to sabotage what they saw as the League's internationalist vocation. They deplored Drummond's support for the imperial powers' desire to draft the Mandate texts in secret and to avoid scrutiny from the League's Assembly and the wider public. Instead, international civil servants like the Swiss William Rappard, the British scholar Philip Baker, or the Dutch jurist Joost Van Hamel argued that the League itself should exercise its right, as implied in the (vague) League Covenant, to draft governing texts and to stage forms of oversight to bring public scrutiny to Mandate rule. Failure to do so, they believed, would discredit the Mandates system, a foundational and high-profile League mission, and thus betray the League's founding principles in the eyes of public opinion. Drummond thought otherwise, believing that such claims by the League would fail and thus embarrass or discredit the League in another way, and that it should accordingly leave drafting responsibility to the imperial powers (452).

---

[5] Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Patricia Clavin, *Securing the World Economy: The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

[6] Carolyn N. Biltoft, *A Violent Peace: Media, Truth and Power at the League of Nations* (University of Chicago Press, 2021); information flows through the League were uneven and biased towards European imperial concerns however - see Arthur Asseraf, "Making their own internationalism: Algerian Media and a few others the League of Nations Ignored, 1919-1943," in Heidi Tworek, Jonas Brendebach and Martin Herzer eds., *Exorbitant Expectations: International Organizations and the Media in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[7] Daniel Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[8] Pedersen, *The Guardians*.

© 2022 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US

This was a battle fought out in internal memos, patronage networks and through the icy touch of bureaucratic cold shoulders (454). Missing commas became political levers. Competing understandings of neutrality and League prestige (in the eyes of key, mainly European publics) were wielded as weapons. At stake, La Porte shows, was "League sovereignty and authority and their application to the involved territories. In other words, did the League have authority over these territories or was it to hand them over to the victorious Powers?" (442). To trace the Secretariat's internal debate on this vital issue, La Porte works very skillfully with sources drawn from the League's archives and from the diplomatic papers of Britain, France and, more unusually, Belgium. He also uses the personal papers of some of the key diplomats, notably Rappard's papers, which are held in the Swiss Federal Archive in Bern, and the Philip Noel-Baker (as Baker was later called) papers at Churchill College, Cambridge. As a result, La Porte gives a vivid, clear picture of the direction of debate within the Secretariat. We accompany its leading officials as they vainly resisted Drummond's willingness to concede the shaping of the Mandate system to the imperial powers, thus subordinating the League and its Covenant to the treaty diplomacy of the Great Powers, as performed in Paris in 1919.

La Porte's forensic approach is productive. He slows down the footage, as it were, and concentrates our attention on a short time period, from 1919-1923, when the League and its flagship Mandate system were at their botched genesis. We thereby gain increased analytical grip on the political and institutional life of the League, and the Secretariat comes into view as an ideologically active and divided place. In this respect La Porte's approach, though written through a political and diplomatic history lens, runs parallel to recent scholarship he cites, by Gram-Skjoldager and Ikonomou, who used a Bourdieusian framework to examine the forms of capital that shaped the League as a bureaucratic institution.[9] Or, at a wider scale, we might think of Leonard V. Smith's book on the international politics of sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference, which took a similarly focused chronological approach to 1919 and the immediately following years.[10]

La Porte argues that through this little window of time, the League Secretariat's quiet resistance to the imperialization of the Mandates system can be heard more clearly than in approaches that rush ahead to take a longer view of the period. Indeed, it is easy to see how, on the face of it, the years from 1919 to1923 *were* pivotal. This was a kind of 'long 1919' or an 'internationalist moment,' to remix Erez Manela's well-known framing, and one which closed with the 'global Thermidor' of 1921-1923.[11] As Adam Mestyan has put it in another context, a large part of the value of zooming in on these "axial moments," is to "understand long-term developments through the close analysis of foundational processes."[12] In the suffering of the acorn, we glimpse the stunted oak. La Porte makes precisely this claim for the durable influence of this inaugural phase: "Disregarding the initial debates on [Mandates'] meaning and functions risks overlooking not only the mandates' foundational beliefs but also the profound disappointment experienced by those who felt the League ultimately betrayed these ideals" (441). A key target here is historiography by scholars including Pedersen and (less recently) Michael D. Callahan, which, La Porte suggests, focuses excessively on the operation, discourse, and logics of the Mandates'

[9] Karen Gram-Skjoldager and Haakon A. Ikonomou, "The Construction of the League of Nations Secretariat. Formative Practices of Autonomy and Legitimacy in International Organizations," *International History Review* 41, no. 2 (2019): 257–79.

[10] Leonard V. Smith, *Sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[11] Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); for global Thermidor see Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916–1931* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), 354.

[12] Adam Mestyan, "Domestic Sovereignty, A'Yan Developmentalism, and Global Microhistory in Modern Egypt," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, no. 2 (2018): 421.

© 2022 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US

administration by the PMC, once the Mandates were up and running.[13] This approach "runs the chance of diminishing the legal and ethical issues involved in their conception and drafting and, in doing so, it may miss some crucial conditions that explained their evolution." (441). In other words, we must focus more on the very early years, because the debates held on sovereignty over the Mandate system at that time, and on the power of the League relative to the colonial empires, had influential effects on what came next (as well as illuminating the diversity of opinion inside the League).

All histories must choose start and end points, and those choices enable differing interpretive strategies. Moreover, an article cannot cover as much ground as a monograph. Undoubtedly, La Porte's approach in this article succeeds amply in revealing the internal struggle that marked the Secretariat in its infancy. We see especially clearly the strong commitment of officials such as Baker to an internationalist reading of the League Covenant's implications for the Mandate system, and the wider concern in the Secretariat to protect some vestiges of the League's geo-political status. Magnifying the very early years, La Porte shows clearly how Baker, Rappard, and their internationalist colleagues lost their struggle to maintain the powerful, sovereign League role in the Mandates that they had hoped for in 1919-1920, and which they believed the League had the legal, political, and moral capacity to perform.

But equally, some of La Porte's arguments could be nuanced. For instance, existing scholarship has not entirely neglected these early debates. Pedersen, for example, covers Baker's doomed efforts, notably in November 1920, at the first meeting of the League Assembly, to pull Drummond and the League Council, dominated by the victorious allies, towards greater engagement with the Assembly in particular, internationalism more generally, and public transparency on the Mandates going forward.[14]

Second, the larger concern of the recent historiography, which La Porte sees as under-estimating the League's early failures and rapid subordination to European imperialism, has been to focus on *how* the Mandates worked (i.e., operated) and not "whether Mandates 'worked or not'," as La Porte characterizes it (441). To grasp how they 'worked,' including in some ways against their imperial controllers, this literature has had to focus on a longer period, essentially the 1920s but also into the 1930s, and on the interactions of the PMC with Mandate authorities, anti-colonial petitioners, and others, like the press. It was precisely by taking this view and this longer timeline that Pedersen, for instance, could argue that the Mandates system fostered political logics and practices that were not among its imperialist creators' intentions, and that may indeed have seeded anti-colonial nationalism later in the century.

Simply put, the period 1919-1923 certainly had a strong influence on what came next, and La Porte helps us understand the sources and nature of that influence. But the early period did not totally determine what came next: subsequent pressures and contingencies also played a role. The Mandates system, while hardly realizing the aims of European internationalists like Baker, nevertheless evolved and shaped imperial and anti-colonial politics, despite its domination by the Mandatory powers. For example, Drummond's own insistence on a functional rather than a national structure to the Secretariat bureaucracy gave a lever to internationalists like Rappard, who in his turn was able to set up the Mandates Section in ways that fostered forms of agency for and at the League. But that agency, no doubt limited, then had to be exercised by the Mandates Section and the members of the PMC, for example in their evolving handling of petitions from the Mandate populations and in their uncertain relationship with the press and publicity.[15] This, for Pedersen and others, was a new style of politics that gradually emerged and that exposed the PMC to unexpected claims. Even in the confines of a short article, then, it would

---

[13] Michael D. Callahan "'Mandated Territories are not Colonies': Britain, France, and Africa in the 1930s," in R.M. Douglas, Michael Dennis Callahan, and Elizabeth Bishop eds., *Imperialism on Trial: International Oversight of Colonial Rule in Historical Perspective* (Lanham: Lexington, 2006).

[14] Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 50-52.

[15] Natasha Wheatley, "Mandatory Interpretation: Legal Hermeneutics and the New International Order in Arab and Jewish Petitions to the League of Nations," *Past & Present* 227 (2015): 205-248.

© 2022 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US

have been helpful to hear a little more about the afterlife of Drummond's victory over his internationalist colleagues and about how the legacies of that combat shaped the PMC's subsequent navigation of its role, for instance after the arrival of Germany in the League in 1926.

Finally, those petitions to the PMC also show that League oversight and agency, however limited, became the subject of claim-making from people living (far from Geneva) under Mandate rule. They were naturally more aware than anyone of the imperialist form in which the Mandate system had emerged in 1919-1923, but were determined to try to contest and shape it nonetheless. They pursued that effort across the 1920s, thereby shaping the PMC and the League's work. La Porte worries, laudably, that by neglecting the early debates over sovereignty in the Mandates, scholars minimize "the views of the populations who lived under mandate administration and in many cases judged the mandates based on the League Covenant" (442). But we don't hear much from those 'populations' in La Porte's approach in this piece (perhaps a monograph-length expansion of his argument could include this). Moreover, as Hussein Omar and Elizabeth F. Thompson, for instance, have noted of the Middle East, most in that region seldom had interest in *any* kind of Mandate rule in 1919-23, even in its most avowedly internationalist form. Instead, they wanted national independence, as had been achieved by former Habsburg subjects.[16] Subsequently, many people subjected to Mandate rule proceeded to judge (and resist) the mandates not just by their divergence from the Covenant's original (and still paternalist) international ideals, but by the everyday realities of repression and extraction in the 1920s, and by contrast with life in other countries around the world.

Overall, then, La Porte's decision to focus on a brief, foundational period is a highly generative one. But, by diversifying the holders of those 'foundational beliefs' about League sovereignty beyond the Secretariat (and perhaps beyond Geneva), he could create a broader picture and capture the consequences, for the subsequent years, of this vital, bitter moment.

Dr Simon Jackson (Ph.D., NYU) teaches the global and colonial history of the modern Middle East and Mediterranean at the University of Birmingham (UK), where he is an Assistant Professor. His research, which focuses on France and its colonial empire in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, has been published in journals including *Humanity, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, and *Contemporary European History*. His book, *Mandatory Development: French Colonial Empire, Global Capitalism and the Politics of the Economy after World War One*, is under contract with Cornell University Press. His next project is a global and imperial history of North African phosphate.

[16] Elizabeth F. Thompson, *Justice Interrupted: the Struggle for Constitutional Government in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Hussein A.H. Omar, "The Arab Spring of 1919," *London Review of Books Blog*, 4 April 2019, https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2019/april/the-arab-spring-of-1919.

© 2022 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US