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Reviews

The guardians: the League of Nations and the crisis of empire

By Susan Pedersen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xviii + 571. Hardback £25.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-957048-5; paperback £14.99, ISBN: 978-0-19-874349-1.

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In *The guardians*, Susan Pedersen has given us the first full history of the League of Nations' Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC) in half a century. An important part of the League, the mandates system (consisting of seven mandate powers and fourteen territories) was set up to administer those enemy territories in Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific seized from Germany and the Ottoman empire by the victors at the end of the First World War. The book starts with an examination of the origins of the mandates system, the major players, and the establishment and expansion of the League bureaucracy. Pedersen takes the story through the years following German entrance into the League and the impact of Germany – as the sole great power without colonies – on the mandates system. The Germans quickly learned the language of international control but spoke it primarily to mask their efforts to reclaim lost German territories. In the process they became deeply involved in League activities and worked tirelessly to prevent the other imperial powers from tying their mandates more closely into their own colonial empires. Along the way we are given useful examinations of uprisings in South West Africa and Western Samoa, revolt in Syria, famine in Rwanda, immigration and Zionist politics in Palestine, and the uneven road to Iraqi independence. The declining years of the mandates system came in the aftermath of economic collapse in the 1930s, along with Hitler's rise to power and German, Japanese, and Italian withdrawal from the League. By the late 1930s virtually all the great powers had lost faith in the mandates system and it collapsed along with the League itself.

The racist and paternalistic assumptions upon which the system was based are carefully explored, beginning with Article 22 of the League Covenant, which provided for the 'advanced nations' to manage the affairs of those 'peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world'. It was set up ostensibly to help these 'needy' peoples prepare for and then embark on the road to independence and self-determination, but the great powers and the PMC operated almost in the opposite way, doing whatever they could to undermine nascent independence movements and their leaders. The members of the PMC took their civilizational obligations seriously and tried to ensure the protection of the peoples in the mandated territories, but rarely in a way that directly challenged the mandate powers or their understanding of their mission. At no time was

the racial certainty of the inability of non-whites to look after their own affairs questioned – even when confronted by peoples in some mandated territories, such as New Guinea, who appeared to be doing exactly that. By the late 1930s, with the rise of Nazism, civil war in Spain, and old-style imperialism in Ethiopia, the European powers looked less and less like the world leaders of 'civilization', especially as they descended into 'colonial appeasement' – a cynical gesture for Germany to get back in the colonial game in exchange for peace in Europe.

Pedersen's larger goal is to expose the unintended consequences of the mandates system. Ostensibly established to help the imperial powers collaborate and settle the lingering issues from the war, the mandates system evolved into something much more complex. The mandates were granted to the imperial powers but efforts were made to limit their rule through a new kind of international control and by making the imperial powers report to the PMC and respond to its questions. In the modern world of improving communications and faster travel, international public opinion was better able to observe, question, and criticize what was happening in the mandated territories. Pedersen argues that what was 'transformative' about this new system was not how the mandate states acted or their espousal of the 'rhetoric of the civilizing mission', but 'the apparatus and level of international diplomacy, publicity, and 'talk' that the system brought into being' (p. 4). The PMC could not dictate behaviour, but it could compel the mandate states to defend their actions in the glare of an emerging global spotlight. As Pedersen puts it, 'it obliged them to *say* they were governing them differently' (p. 4, emphasis in original). The great powers turned to the PMC when they needed it to further their own interests in their mandated territories, and in the process 'internationalized' these issues by seeking international sanction for their foreign policy goals. Once they had started down that path they found it almost impossible to turn back. The mandates system unfolded in this international realm, and from here emerged the modern idea of independence or 'normative statehood' for the decolonizing world.

At the heart of this issue was the question of sovereignty. In most colonial empires sovereignty rested with the mother country, but the PMC worked hard to ensure that in the mandated territories it did not. But if sovereignty resided in neither the mother country nor the mandated territory, where did it lie? With the League? No one could ever fully answer that question, but just asking it gave the mandates a distinct, if not completely clear, status. Pedersen suggests that the fact that the mandatory powers were not sovereign in their mandated territories 'was the most significant achievement of the mandates system', because it meant that a mandate power could not legally annex its territories and, conversely, 'could not deny sovereignty to its wards forever' (p. 231).

This extensively researched and well-written book certainly broadens our understanding of the mandates system and should stimulate more interest in the League's history. It shares a perspective with many other newer studies that focus less on the grand issues of war and peace – the 'rise and fall' school – and instead look at the League and its efforts to deal with a growing list of transnational issues such as health, refugees, economic development, and, in this case, the mandates. From this vantage point the League can be seen as a far more successful organization – 'an agent of geopolitical transformation' (p. 5) – and in it we can find the roots of many of the specialized agencies and commissions of the modern United Nations. 'The League helped make the end of empire imaginable and normative statehood possible', Pedersen concludes, 'not because the empires willed it so, or the Covenant prescribed it, but because that dynamic of internationalization changed everything' (p. 406).

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