

such as ‘humanitarian rights’, then perhaps Cabanes is trying to suggest that this term better captures some important historical changes. But exactly how is unclear. The war was a decisive turning point, and presumably extended new kinds of protections to vulnerable populations. But the content of this shift – what it meant for the claims that individuals could make on states, or the kinds of expectations that they could have during times of war – is left unexplored.

Despite these reservations, this a very welcome, well-written, and well-researched book that captures nicely some of the important post-First World War developments in European and international society.

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

By Susan Pedersen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xviii + 571. Hardback £22.99, ISBN 978-0-19-957048-5.

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The League of Nations, the forerunner of the United Nations, has traditionally been described in terms of failure. This is because the organization failed to stop the aggression of the revisionist powers Japan, Italy, and Germany in the 1930s and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Since the late 1980s, however, there has been a reappraisal of the League, with historians focusing more and more on its humanitarian and technical functions instead of on its efforts to maintain world peace. Especially over the last decade,

we have seen a blossoming of League studies. The latest and most impressive product of this revisionist school is *The guardians* by Susan Pedersen, in which she describes and analyses the history of the mandates system of the League and its influence on the international order during the interwar period.

The introduction and first three chapters form the first part of *The guardians*. In this part, Pedersen provides a historical context for the creation and functioning of the League and the birth of the mandates system at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. During the First World War, the German and Ottoman empires lost their African, Pacific, and Middle Eastern territories to the Allied Powers. If the occupying Allied countries had had it their way, they would have annexed these former colonies straightaway. However, the new international norm of Wilsonian self-determination current at the end of the war and the Bolshevik challenge hampered this.

The mandates system invented at the Paris Peace Conference was a compromise from the start. It made a distinction between developed and less-developed mandated territories. Mandated countries could be treated as provisionally independent nations (‘A’ mandates, the Middle Eastern Arab territories); being in need of more tutelage but not to be administered as part of the mandating powers’ colonial territories (‘B’ mandates, German Africa other than South West Africa); or as territories best administered under the laws of the mandatory as integral portions of its territory because of their low level of civilization (‘C’ mandates, South West Africa, plus postcolonial Oceania). The mandatory powers – Britain, France, Japan, South Africa, Belgium, Australia, and New Zealand – were supposed to govern in the interests of the local population. As a result, slavery, forced labour, liquor traffic, and other abuses were not

allowed in the territories. The occupying powers were given actual administrative control, while affirming a measure of international control. Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations provided for a Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC) of experts to advise the League's Council and to receive annual reports from each of the mandatory powers.

When the United States decided not to join the League, the imperial powers hoped that the mandates system would wither away. Pedersen shows how the system was saved in the early 1920s by the League's first secretary-general, Sir Eric Drummond, his trusted assistant, Philip Baker, and William Rappard, the director of the secretariat's Mandates Section. Also of importance were the First and Second Assemblies, where an outcry over South Africa's bombing of the Bondelswarts, a poor pastoral tribe in South West Africa, put the country on the defensive. France, Britain, Belgium, and the other mandatory regimes were compelled to start reporting to the League of Nations in Geneva over issues of nationality, the Rwandan border dispute, and the debate concerning the administration over Nauru.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 form the second part. Here Pedersen analyses how the mandatory powers learned to play the 'mandate game' (p. 74), and draw on the rhetoric of liberal internationalism in Geneva while ruling their territories. It is very interesting to read that France justified its bombing of Damascus in 1925 during the Syrian revolt using the language of civilization. The argument that the indigenous population lacked the ability to rule themselves was later invoked by New Zealand to render inadmissible the claim to self-determination of Western Samoa's Mau Movement.

The next three chapters constitute the third part of *The guardians*. They start with the entry of Germany into the League of

Nations in 1926. Germany was not only the sole European great power without an empire but also the former sovereign of most of the territories under mandatory rule. According to Pedersen, German membership ushered in the mandate system's most innovative period, which would last until 1933. In this period, Berlin wanted to rebuild Germany's position as a great power in a globalizing world and to that end it supported the principle of self-determination and the provisions of the 'open door' in its former colonies. Pedersen demonstrates how the PMC made great efforts in Geneva to keep the mandatory powers within the mandates system. The PMC forced the League's Council to accept the norm that mandatory powers were not sovereign in mandated territories. London was not amused. Pedersen's analysis of the British push in the early 1930s for Iraqi independence by invoking the language of internationalization is very convincing. Essentially, it was an attempt by the British to limit international oversight, economic access, and diplomatic meddling. We can see the impact of the 'emancipation' on a daily basis in the news today.

Chapters 10, 11, and 12 form the fourth and final part of the book, and cover the years 1933–39. Pedersen shows how the exit of Germany, Japan, and Italy fatally undermined the League of Nations. The revisionist powers criticized the mandatory system and claimed that they could do a better job. Japan annexed the Pacific islands it was administering, and Italy invaded Abyssinia, a League member. At the beginning of 1938, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain considered reforming the mandates system to reflect the realities – and, he hoped, to reduce the dangers – of the shifting European balance of power. However, Hitler was not interested in the return of the former German colonies. What the Nazi leader wanted was in Europe, and he wanted to take it by military force.

The guardians is a wonderful book. Its central thread is constituted by the PMC, the body within the League that examined reports, received more than 3,000 petitions over its existence, and investigated crises in the mandate territories. All nine members of the body were named by the League's Council; one of them was a woman and most were former colonial experts. Because the members were well integrated into their countries' imperial and foreign policy establishments, they proved hard to control by the League. It is also worth noting that the members served without term (which led to the development of lasting friendships), the PMC was independent (which did not prevent its members from discussing topics privately with their governments before the sessions), and it derived its authority from written texts. Furthermore, its deliberations were publicized. Pedersen's portrayal of the PMC members is vivid. The pedantic and socially inept Dutchman Van Rees stands out in particular. She calls him a great nuisance.

No doubt he was a bore, but 'no one did more to establish the principle that mandatory powers were "not sovereign" in the mandated territories' (p. 206). After 1945, the PMC was replaced by the United Nations Trusteeship Council, whose principle task was to help ensure that trust territories – most of them former mandates or territories taken from nations defeated at the end of the Second World War – were governed in the best interests of their inhabitants and of international peace and security.

The guardians emphasizes the development of the spoken and unspoken rules of the 'mandates game'; the nature and functioning of the League's Secretariat, Council, and Assembly; the capacity and characters of its key players; the practices, procedures, ideas, and norms that were 'invented' at the time through a creative process of cultural transfer; and finally its unintended consequences. The book marks a milestone in our understanding of the League of Nations.