



Haakon Ikononou, Karen Gram-Skjoldager, eds. *The League of Nations: Perspectives from the Present*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2019. Illustrations. 283 pp \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-87-7184-620-1.

Reviewed by Aurora Almada e Santos (Instituto de História Contemporânea da Universidade Nova de Lisboa)

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Undoubtedly, when studying the past we are influenced by existing intellectual concerns, not least because our mental framework is shaped by our time. Haakon A. Ikononou and Karen Gram-Skjoldager acknowledge such an assumption by adding the subtitle *Perspectives from the Present* to their edited volume, *The League of Nations*. In their words, the book intends to establish connections between research on the league and current political and cultural debates and concerns. In addition, the publication aims to present new research topics and approaches on the League of Nations, to set an agenda for future scholarship on the organization.

Comprising an introduction, three parts (each with an introduction), twenty-one chapters, and a concluding essay, the book provides great insights into the League of Nations. It deserves careful attention from readers since it builds on the ongoing trend to approach the organization as a renewed field of study. As stated in the introduction, increasingly the League of Nations has been revisited as a laboratory of early global governance, tracing its legacies to the present. The book adds another contribution to such scholarship, surpassing the binary failure versus success that for a long time prevailed in the studies referring to the organization.

Furthermore, the publication assembles a range of scholars from different geographies. The authors are professors, lecturers, postdoctoral researchers, and PhD students, affiliated with institutions in Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Poland, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Working in the fields of history, political science, transcultural studies, and Jewish studies, a number of them have been focusing on international organizations and the League of Nations for a while. By placing precedence on the value of the League of Nations for the contemporary world, many of these scholars are likely to continue in the future to shape the scholarship on the complex history and legacies of the organization.

Equally relevant, the book is remarkable for bringing together subjects reflecting the extent to which scholarly writing on international organizations has been evolving. Rather than focusing on security issues or great power politics, the chapters place precedence on the league's inner workings, its civil servants, and such topics as gender, internationalism, empire, and neoliberalism. The book broadens the debate on the league, with some chapters looking at the interplay between international and national dimensions in the interwar period. In a parallel manner, it restores agency to individual players, highlighting the personal trajec-

ries of bureaucrats and activists like Eric Colban, Thanassis Aghnides, and Israel Zangwill.

Other than these aspects, the book deserves our attention for the use of primary sources and visual materials. The League of Nations Archives in Geneva provided the foundation for most of the chapters as can be seen in the endnotes. In addition, several chapters draw from other sources, gathered in the International Labour Organization archives, in national archives of Belgium and Denmark, and in public and private institutions in the United States. All chapters reproduce visual materials, whether they are photos, charts, tables, newspapers, posters, cartoons, etc. These materials, complemented with detailed captions, are valuable sources to understand the League of Nations.

What do we stand to learn from this book? And what does this publication offer in terms of the wide scope of the league's activities? In explaining the League of Nations' history, the book forwards many interlocking arguments. When taken together, all chapters perceive the League of Nations as a diverse and complex institution. This thesis comes into focus in particular in the chapters of Marco Moraes and Myriam Piguet documenting tensions and conflicting ideologies within the organization, as well as contradictions between its principles and practices. Besides avoiding a monolithic interpretation, the book tends to approach the league as a norm-setting institution, engaged in the codification of international norms. Insights on such a perspective can be found in Florian Wagner's study on how the organization helped to legitimize colonialism. Likewise, Tomoko Akami suggests a similar reading, underlining the contributions of the league's experts for the organization's role in shaping global governing norms.

Drawing on personal experiences or the interplay between national and international levels, in several chapters the characterization of the League of Nations is linked to how significant the organization was for connecting ideas across the

globe and for promoting transnational networks and forms of collaboration. In this sense, Laura Almagor looks at the organization as a microcosm to understand the intersection between nationalism, Jewish history, and politico-religious thought. Søren Friis explores a different angle, analyzing the participation of the Danish Institute of Economics and History at the International Studies Conference, organized by the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation founded under the League of Nations to promote collaboration among scholars and experts. Hagen Schulz-Forberg, while stressing the league's networks of expertise and knowledge making, reaches the conclusion that the organization was the institutional setup within which concepts, like liberalism, emerged.

Similarly, the edited volume has a number of contributions portraying the League of Nations as a source of knowledge production. Other than Akami's abovementioned analysis on the league's experts, Quincy Cloet addresses the degree to which the organization relied on inquiry commissions as knowledge-producing bodies to curb international problems. Although approaching the subject from the perspective of the narratives fueled by the League of Nations on its own activities, other chapters also shed light on the specificities of the organization's knowledge production. On the one hand, Emil Eiby Seidenfaden delves into how the organization used the discussions on false news to spread knowledge about its work and promote public legitimization. On the other hand, Helle Strandgaard Jensen, Nikolai Schulz, and Seidenfaden offer a review of the use of the infomercial *The League at Work*, produced in 1937, for self-promotion and interaction with public opinion.

Many texts in the volume recognize the League of Nations as an object of cultural production, which is, as pointed out by one of the authors, relatively uncharted territory. In line with such an assumption, Benjamin Auberer gives the readers an overview of the novels written about the orga-

nization and their shift from a positive to a negative image of the League of Nations. Paul Reef uncovers the perceptions and feelings regarding the league based on political cartoons depicting criticisms of the organization. Finally, Marco Ninno turns our attention to how the League of Nations inspired a modernist architect, Le Corbusier, to take part in the competition for the construction of the headquarters of the organization in Geneva.

Directly or in more general terms, the authors establish connections among the League of Nations and the United Nations, insisting that, notwithstanding the differences, one organization endured through the other. Niels Brimnes goes as far as to compare and draw similarities on decisions of both organizations on health issues, while Cloet frames the League of Nations as the place where a set of institutional practices inherited by the United Nations was born. Ninno touches the subject slightly when addressing Le Corbusier's participation in the competition for the construction of the Palais des Nations and its presence among the team of architects charged with the completion of the UN building in New York. Ultimately, Torsten Kahler's assessment of the liquidation and transfer of the league's material assets and properties to the United Nations is the one that best captures this dimension, concluding that no neat distinction between the two organizations existed throughout the process.

In the end, the book offers a multitude of overlapping readings, pointing out, as the concluding essay of Patrick Finney highlights, the avenues through which the League of Nations will continue to inspire further research. The overall tone of the book makes clear that the historiography on the organization has a plurality of approaches and is being shaped by the emergence of new intellectual concerns. The book builds on the current historiography on the League of Nations, establishing productive conversations with previous publications and in some cases presenting alternative interpretations. Two examples can illustrate the book's

widening of the historiography on the organization. The first example applies to the league's mandate system studied in detail by Susan Pederson (*The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* [2015]), whose conclusion that the Permanent Mandates Commission helped to cast a negative light on colonialism is challenged. From the edited volume, readers can learn another version of the facts, according to which the commission did not intend to subvert but only to reform colonialism. The second example refers to the transition of the League of Nations to the United Nations. Although the book does not diverge from Mark Mazower's conclusions on the origins of the United Nations in *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* [2009]), it introduces a different perspective to understand the continuities among the organizations.

Even if the merits of the volume are undeniable, other topics could have been explored in greater depth to strengthen the main arguments. The wide range of non-state actors, which have been incorporated into the study of international organizations, is almost entirely missing from the book.[1] Through other publications we know, for instance, a great deal of information about interactions between the Anti-Slavery Society and the organization, but the picture is far from being complete in the face of the number of non-state actors that interacted with the League of Nations. [2] For many of them, there are still no studies to elucidate to what extent they shared the league's ideals and tried to take advantage of the organization to promote change and help solve common international problems. The book also ignores the actual impact of the League of Nations, especially of its norms, on the daily lives of peoples. The parameters of inquiry could have been expanded to assess whether the league's initiatives had local effects and how local actors became involved in the implementation of decisions originated from the organization.[3]

On another level, the structure of the book could have been conceived differently. The distribution of the chapters in the three parts is not always clear. In two or three situations, the chapters could have been placed in a different section of the book. Moreover, the publication could also have been enriched with biographical notes of the authors to help situate their contributions to the volume in the context of their research interests.

Notes

[1]. For the interactions between international organizations and non-state actors, see, for example, Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws, eds., *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[2]. See, for example, Amalia Ribi Forclaz, *Humanitarian Imperialism: The Politics of Anti-Slavery Activism, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[3]. On this issue, see Caroline Authaler, “Negotiating ‘Social Progress’: German Planters, African Workers and Mandate Administrators in the British Cameroons (1925-1939),” in *The League of Nations’ Work on Social Issues: Visions, Endeavours and Experiments*, ed. Magaly Rodríguez García, Davide Rodogno, and Liat Kozma (Geneva: United Nations, 2016), 47-56.

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