



WHAT DID THE LEAGUE DO, EXACTLY?

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At first glance the pictures are maddeningly repetitive. One League of Nations delegation in the 1920s looked pretty much like any other – almost exclusively male assemblies in top hats and business suits. The [League of Nations Photo Archive](#), housed on-line at Indiana University, all but invites the determined browser to spot the rare examples of sartorial distinction or new trends in facial hair. (The Egyptian delegates wore fezzes.)

More surprising to some may be the wide range of League activities documented on the Indiana web site. What matters here is not so much the images themselves – no one ever said multilateral diplomacy was a photographer’s dream. But the captions are amazingly varied. Rendered here are sessions of a “Second General Conference on Communications and Transit”; a “Conference for the Exchange of Health Personnel”; and an “International Conference on the Repression of Obscene Publications” – and these are just some of the events held in Geneva in a single year, 1923. Add in the many conferences in London, Paris, Rome, and – more sporadically – Warsaw, Berlin, Copenhagen, and Montevideo, and one sees a “global community” made manifest.¹ Such activity has not, until recently, factored heavily into standard narratives of diplomacy in the interwar era. Great power politics – the story of war and peace – has long overshadowed other problems of international life in this period.²

A survey of recent journal literature suggests just how much can be gained from close attention to the workings of the League and its various ancillary committees in the 1920s and 1930s.³ Medical and humanitarian cooperation; economic analysis; minority

¹ The term is, of course, drawn from the title of Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). For a complete list of conferences sponsored under the auspices of the League of Nations, see <http://www.indiana.edu/~league/conferencedata.htm>.

² Zara Steiner’s monumental survey of the 1920s is no exception here, in that the prominent coverage accorded to the League deals almost exclusively with problems of disarmament and conflict resolution. Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History, 1919-1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); for Steiner’s treatment of the League’s “non-political” work, see esp. 365-71.

³ In keeping with the guiding philosophy of the “International History Spotlight,” this essay will focus on article literature with only occasional reference to book publications. For an outline of the goals of the HIS, see <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/IHS/>.

protection: such activities complemented the League's initiatives in the realm of disarmament. Taken together, they enrich our understanding of the texture of international relations in the interwar period, with a heightened attention to the ambitions of transnational activists, the standardization of norms of measurement and diagnosis (if not conduct!), and the broad reach of great power interests into the narrowest minutiae of international deliberations. If there were "many UNs," as Paul Kennedy has recently observed, there were nearly as many Leagues of Nations.⁴ The articles discussed below consider the League's activities in the economic, humanitarian, and security spheres.

The League's Economic Expertise

In retrospect, it can be hard to fathom how the League was once considered modern, let alone a portent of the future. Yet that is precisely the excitement that **Jo-Anne Pemberton** documents in her article "New Worlds for Old: The League of Nations in the Age of Electricity." The key term in Pemberton's account is "rationalization": just as outmoded concepts such as sovereignty were (allegedly) giving way to a more scientific management of international conflict, so also the "world-improvers" fostered "a sustaining myth that social or economic frictions could be overcome through the application of intelligence by bodies of experts."⁵ The International Institute of Scientific Management (IMI), based on Geneva, emerged in 1926 as a proponent of measures to make markets more orderly – if need be by fostering the growth of international cartels to break down parochial barriers to the integration of markets. Others anticipated, in the wake of the 1927 World Economic Conference, a move toward economic planning on a worldwide basis. The Depression quickly pushed the utopians in a different direction, of course, toward a nationalization of planning activity (a "nationalization of rationalization," as it were).⁶ But Pemberton's article calls attention to a significant strain of opinion in Geneva that was not beholden to orthodox *laissez-faire* assumptions.

Pemberton's work is strong on atmospheric but diffuse in its treatment of economic issues. A more painstaking analysis can be found in the work of **Patricia Clavin** and **Jens-Wilhelm Wessels** (†). Writing in *Contemporary European History*, Clavin and Wessels present a careful overview of the work of the League's Economic and Financial

⁴ Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Nations: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations* (New York: Random House, 2006).

⁵ Jo-Anne Pemberton, "New Worlds for Old: The League of Nations in the Age of Electricity," *Review of International Studies* 28, 2 (2002): 311-336; quote from 315-16. doi: 10.1017/S026021050200311X. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1017/S026021050200311X>.

⁶ See also Pemberton, "The Middle Way: The Discourse of Planning in Britain, Australia and at the League in the Interwar Years," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 52, 1 (2006): 48-63. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8497.2006.00407a.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2006.00407a.x>.

Organization (EFO). The EFO had at its disposal a permanent secretariat (the Economic and Financial *Section*, later split in two), which – like any halfway ambitious technical staff – soon graduated from compiling statistics to offering detailed policy recommendations. Substantive discussions of economic problems took place in the Economic and Financial *Committees*, which consisted of nominally independent financial experts appointed on a state-by-state basis. Each fall these two committees received mandates from the one of the League’s principal talking chambers, the Second Committee of the League Assembly.⁷ But the real impetus came from below, according to Clavin and Wessels. By the mid-1930s, the civil servants running the Economic and Financial Sections – Pietro Stoppani and Arthur Loveday, respectively – had come to represent a distinctive “League voice” that often ran counter to the wishes of London, Paris, and even the League’s own Secretary-General, Eric Drummond. Working with great subtlety, Stoppani and Loveday pushed the EFO to discuss wide-ranging reforms to the international economic order, including currency realignment, trade liberalization, and even a departure from the gold standard. None of these policies were actually embraced by the League, and one might well conclude that Clavin and Wessels devote an inordinate amount of attention to “minority reports” that had little resonance at the time.⁸ But a broader point still matters – namely, that the technical work of the League fostered the growth of transnational contacts below the level of nation-states, contacts that would greatly facilitate the smooth operation of Bretton Woods in happier times. Geneva is not the only place to look, however: the Bank of International Settlements (BIS) in Basle, founded in 1930, also helped to generate a long-term sense of community among central bankers.

Clavin and Wessels have little to say about the League’s more active economic guidance: its role in the financial reconstruction of Austria and Hungary in the interwar period. Austrians haven’t forgotten, according to **Peter Berger**; the period is remembered as a *Finanzdiktatur*, a “financial dictatorship” administered by Geneva with the same charm and sensitivity that critics would later associate with the IMF. Berger challenges this view, basing his judgment on a close look at the work of League Commissioners on the ground in Vienna in the years 1922-28 and 1931-36.⁹ The problem was not that these

⁷ 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): 465-492. doi: 10.1017/S0960777305002729. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0960777305002729> .Charts on pp. 480-81 help to clarify the flow of information among these various bodies.

⁸ This is particularly the case in another other recent article by Clavin and Wessels: “Another Golden Idol? The League of Nations’ Gold Delegation and the Great Depression, 1929-1932,” *International History Review* 26, 4 (December 2004): 765-795.

⁹ Peter Berger, “The League of Nations and Interwar Austria: Critical Assessment of a Partnership in Economic Reconstruction,” *Contemporary Austrian Studies* 11 (2003): 73-92. The over-arching theme of this volume, edited by Günter Bischof, Anton Pelinka, and Alexander Lassner, is “The Dollfuss/Schuschnigg Era in Austria: A Reassessment.”

League representatives foisted Geneva's orthodox, deflationary policies upon the Austrians, but rather that the League Commissioners picked sides at a time of intense civil disturbance in Austria. Meinoud Rost van Tonningen, the Dutchman delegated to Vienna by the League in 1931, doubted the ability of the Austrian parliament to take the necessary austerity measures; he expressed a preference for "emergency decrees" and later welcomed the dissolution of the parliament. By 1936 Rost had come to favor a National Socialist solution to Austria's economic problems – preferably in the form of an *Anschluss!* – thus disavowing the very League financial system that he was supposed to represent.¹⁰ Leaving aside Rost's outrageous political bias, what stands out in Berger's account is the extent to which Austrian finance ministers and central bankers welcomed the League's financial involvement as an occasion to undertake the kind of radical deflationary "cure" that they themselves preferred. The League was in no position to *implement* a "financial dictatorship," but it could certainly *endorse* one.

The League's Humanitarian Agenda

Gathering and publishing statistics often served as the first step toward an accumulation of authority and responsibility in Geneva. In "Counting Death and Disease," **Iris Borowy** calls attention to one longstanding statistical endeavor – the drive to create a uniform list of causes of death.¹¹ Such a list was an essential first step toward compiling comparable mortality statistics on a worldwide basis. But finding consensus on medical definitions proved elusive; such seemingly straightforward concepts as "stillborn" varied across borders, reflecting differing cultural notions of when life begins. The work was further hampered by institutional rivalries: the International Statistical Institute (ISI) in The Hague took a more passive attitude toward data collection, while the League of Nations Health Organization (LNHO) in Geneva sought to use medical data in pursuit of improving standards of living. The Paris-based Office International d'Hygiène Publique (OIHP), jealous of the upstart LNHO, threw its support behind the ISI. At length the ISI and LNHO did reach a compromise, which Borowy characterizes as a significant transitional step toward the more comprehensive role enjoyed by the World Health Organization (WHO) after 1945. (The list of causes of death is still being reviewed and revised on a decennial basis.)

Institutional rivalry is also a key theme in **John Hutchinson's** work on the International Relief Organization (IRO). In a lengthy two-part analysis published in the *International History Review*, Hutchinson examines efforts to standardize disaster relief in the interwar

¹⁰ Berger has produced a full-length treatment of Rost's anti-democratic activities in Vienna; see *Im Schatten der Diktatur. Die Finanzdiplomatie des Vertreters des Völkerbundes in Österreich. Meinoud Rost van Tonningen, 1931-1936* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2000).

¹¹ Iris Borowy, "Counting Death and Disease: Classification of Death and Disease in the Interwar Years, 1919-1939," *Continuity and Change* 18, 3 (2003): 457-481. doi: 10.1017/S0268416003004715. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0268416003004715>.

years.¹² The project was the brainchild of an Italian senator and president of the Italian Red Cross, Giovanni Ciraolo. Hutchinson is careful not to lionize Ciraolo as a far-thinking visionary; if anything, the Italian comes across as single-minded, vain, and somewhat delusional. Ciraolo's one-man show did find concrete institutional expression with the founding of the IRO in Geneva in 1927. But this step is seen here as a ploy by the great powers to embrace a popular concept – rapid-response disaster relief – while rendering the organization harmless by starving it of funds. Hutchinson is careful not to build too stark a contrast between cynical governments and well-meaning publics, though; he observes that national Red Cross societies were themselves far too addicted to spectacular displays of generosity. The prospect of making regular payments into a generic international fund, in accord with Ciraolo's original plan, lacked an element of heroism. Overall, Hutchinson's goal in these minutely researched articles is to highlight the contrast between the seeming high-mindedness of international relief work and the underlying complexities – a story of “conflict, competition, skepticism, and naivety.”¹³

The dark side of international “sympathy” is developed further in a recent article by **Sarah Paddle**. Paddle examines the international outcry, advanced above all by British feminists in the 1920s, surrounding the abject condition of Chinese “slave girls” – girls sold by their parents into domestic service or concubinage. Such practices were decried in League publications, including a 1933 report by the “Commission of Inquiry into Trafficking in Women and Children.” To Kathleen Simon, author of a 1929 tract called simply *Slavery*, the morality of the League's cause was clear-cut: “We are the custodians of civilization, and it is up to us to see that this great crime is wiped off the face of the world.”¹⁴ The League set out to bureaucratize the problem with a system of registering and identifying Chinese “slave girls.” But Paddle notes that social workers closer to the ground in China tended to resist the blanket and culturally alien category of “slavery.” At any rate, the sale of children could not be addressed without broader attention to adoption reform and, more generally, the anchoring of women's rights in Chinese law. Paddle concludes by suggesting that Chinese feminists in the interwar period were already laying the groundwork for a more fundamental re-ordering of gender relations in China – implying that Western pressure was misguided, unnecessary, and perhaps even counter-productive. But what *was* the concrete impact of League moralizing on Chinese regulations and practices? Paddle's suggestive work underscores the need for detailed empirical work, using both Chinese and English-language sources, on the interaction between Western (and League) pressure and local behavior.

¹² John Hutchinson, “Disasters and the International Order: Earthquakes, Humanitarians, and the Ciraolo Project,” *International History Review* 22, 1 (2000): 1-36; Hutchinson, “Disasters and the International Order – II: The International Relief Union,” 23, 2 (2001): 253-298.

¹³ Hutchinson, “Disasters,” 3.

¹⁴ Sarah Paddle, “The Limits of Sympathy: International Feminists and the Chinese ‘Slave Girl’ Campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4, 3 (2003).

Stefan Hell's article on "Diplomacy Versus Opium Dens" puts forward a more direct case for League influence in a local context.¹⁵ Hell examines Siam's cooperation in the work of the League's "Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Opium and Other Dangerous Drugs." The Bangkok government invested considerable effort into fulfilling certain recommendations of the Opium Advisory Committee (OAC): it pushed the consumption of opium into state-sanctioned opium houses, and it established a state monopoly over the import of opium. Such measures brought fiscal advantages, of course, as "sin taxes" always do. But its model behavior also brought Siam a modicum of international recognition; a glowing report from a visiting League delegation in 1929 was spring boarded into the hosting of a major opium conference in Bangkok in 1931. How effective was Siam in controlling and *reducing* the consumption of opium? As a proportion of state revenue, opium tax receipts fell sharply from the early 1920s to the mid-1930s. But the state's decision to scale back legal opium imports, in accord with League prescriptions, resulted in widespread smuggling. By the late 1930s, Bangkok responded by fostering the domestic production of opium – a step backward by almost any definition. Having derived what advantages it could from a conscientious application of League guidelines, Siam acted to keep a core group of opium users content. If the League's principles were global, compliance was still a matter for government discretion.

Perhaps the most prominent item on the League's humanitarian agenda was "minority protection." Given the hyper-politicization of this issue by German and Polish petitioners in the interwar period, the topic has been studied for a long time. But a recent wave of "revisionist" sentiment merits attention here. Scholars have long disparaged the grossly unequal treaties foisted upon Poland and the other Habsburg successor states, which exposed them to a higher degree of scrutiny than the Western European and Commonwealth members of the League. Didn't the more universal program of "human rights" in the 1940s represent a significant advance over the League's limited agenda of "group rights"? **Mark Mazower** answers in the negative, observing that revulsion against Nazism was hardly foremost in the minds of British, American, and Soviet negotiators when they chose to embrace the concept of "human rights."¹⁶ They rejected the League's methods out of expediency: minority protection weakened national sovereignty, whereas the Big Three were determined to build an international order that reinforced the sovereign nation-state as the principal actor in world affairs. Human rights were completely unenforceable at the United Nations – though Mazower does acknowledge their later relevance as an instrument of Cold War pressure against the USSR. What Mazower and **Carole Fink** both suggest is that the abandonment of "group rights" as a legal concept left the international community utterly stymied by the ethnic civil wars of

¹⁵ Stefan Hell, "Diplomatie gegen Opiumhöhlen. Siam und die Bemühungen des Völkerbundes zur internationalen Opiumkontrolle," *Periplus* 10 (2000): 154-175.

¹⁶ Mark Mazower, "The Strange Triumph of Human Rights, 1933-1950," *The Historical Journal* 47, 2 (2004): 379-398. doi: 10.1017/S0018246X04003723. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X04003723> .

the 1990s. To Fink, writing in *Contemporary European History* and at greater length in her recent monograph, it was the implementation rather than the principle of minority protection that went awry during the interwar years.¹⁷ Perhaps the most significant challenge of this revisionist view is that it upends the often Whiggish assumptions behind much writing on human rights. The League's methods were not necessarily a sorry chapter in the dark prehistory of human rights; they represented a substantial effort to stabilize ethnically diverse regions without recourse to the drastic expedients of mass expulsions or "ethnic cleansing." (The oft-cited exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey was the exception, not the rule, in the 1920s.)

Given the broad reach of League activities – in the drug trade, the protection of women and children, refugee and disaster relief – one might well wonder about the *limits* of League ambitions. One clear example, environmental protection, is supplied by Anna-Katharina Wöbse.¹⁸ In 1913, Swiss naturalist Paul Sarasin had called into being a "World Nature Protection Commission"; after the Great War, Sarasin hoped to see this commission integrated into the work of the League in Geneva. Secretary General Eric Drummond rejected this prospect out of hand, and Sarasin died a bitter man. Later, in the 1930s, the League's Transit and Traffic Section did contemplate a general ban on the dumping of waste oil at sea. This still-common practice was clogging coastal waters and harbors and taking an alarming toll on waterfowl. But ultimately the League's bureaucrats failed to act, proving more responsive to merchant interests than the voices of civil society. Wöbse attributes this outcome to the weakness of non-governmental organizations in the interwar years: whereas commercial interests had their lobbyists, environmentalists did not. This is reasonable as far as it goes, but Wöbse also notes in passing another major obstacle: the world's navies. Problems of national security trumped environmental considerations during the interwar years, and for that matter most or all other humanitarian endeavors.

International Security at the League of Nations

Until recently, much of the literature on League politics focused on "flashpoints" – the Corfu Crisis, the Manchurian Crisis, and the Italo-Abyssinian War, to name a few. Such episodes continue to attract attention. **Cristiano Ristuccia**, for example, has recently calculated whether tougher League sanctions against Italy would have made a difference in 1935. He reaches a mixed verdict: the Italians could have weathered the loss of coal deliveries, but oil was another matter, given that beyond a certain point the demand for

¹⁷ Carole Fink, "Minority Rights as an International Question," *Contemporary European History* 9, 3 (2000): 385-400. doi:10.1017/S0960777300003052. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0960777300003052>. Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority Protection, 1878-1938* (New York: Cambridge, 2004).

¹⁸ Anna-Katharina Wöbse, "Der Schutz der Natur im Völkerbund – Anfänge einer Weltumweltpolitik," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 43 (2003): 177-190.

road transport was inelastic. An embargo on oil would have triggered an industrial collapse in Italy within months, even if (as expected) the United States refused to participate. None of this would have directly blocked Italy's conquest of Abyssinia, but it would have imposed material costs that even Mussolini might have found difficult to stomach.¹⁹

Aside from these “flashpoints,” scholars are paying more and more attention to the workings of the League as a security system – albeit a flawed one. Disarmament emerges here as the principal topic: what failed, and why, during the interwar years? In his article “From Versailles to Geneva,” **Andrew Webster** offers a general overview of six disarmament strategies. These bear repeating here: (1) forced German disarmament under the Treaty of Versailles; (2) cuts in armaments levels and military budgets; (3) naval arms limitation; (4) “limited” disarmament schemes under League auspices; (5) disarmament measures as a form of security, pursued 1922-25; and finally (6) general disarmament, attempted haltingly in the years 1926-34. Webster's taxonomy is tremendously useful, for it helps to categorize the various case studies found in the journal literature. His conclusion is fairly standard, however: responsibility for “the success of failure of all six forms of disarmament” lay “squarely in the hands of the great powers, and they had been loathe to surrender any ounce of their own independence in matters of their own defence and security.”²⁰

There is little doubt that disagreements among the great powers, France and Britain in particular, dogged the work of the League at every step. But how amenable were the *smaller* powers to embracing effective, and therefore restrictive, forms of arms control? **David R. Stone** places this dynamic at the center of his study of the League's effort to regulate international arms trafficking (a “limited” disarmament measure, number 4 on Webster's taxonomy).²¹ Stone opens with a look back at the clubby era of imperialism, when the great powers could readily agree amongst themselves to restrict arms sales to colonies and even to sovereign states in non-European regions. It is unsurprising that the League found it difficult to justify such discriminatory practices. What's telling is that Geneva faced great difficulties implementing the kind of bureaucratic procedures – export licensing and the gathering of statistics – that had become standard in other facets of the

¹⁹ Cristiano Andrea Ristuccia, “The 1935 Sanctions Against Italy: Would coal and oil have made a difference?”, *European Review of Economic History* 4 (2000), 85-110. doi: 10.1017/S1361491600000150. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1361491600000150> . It should be noted that Ristuccia's analysis is exclusively oriented toward assessing the sectoral Italian demand for oil and coal; it is not a counterfactual study of Mussolini's likely behavior.

²⁰ Andrew Webster, “From Versailles to Geneva: The Many Forms of Interwar Disarmament,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, 2 (April 2006): 225-246; quote from 244. doi: 10.1080/01402390600585050. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402390600585050> .

²¹ David R. Stone, “Imperialism and Sovereignty: The League of Nations' Drive to Control the Global Arms Trade,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, 2 (2000): 213-230.

League's work. Small powers, particularly those bordering the Soviet Union, refused to subject their arms imports to international scrutiny. Thus, as Stone explains, it was not the "merchants of death" but the "purchasers of death" who brought "crippling objections" to the 1925 Arms Trafficking Conference in Geneva.²² The security dilemma was too acute.

Was there no "League spirit" to facilitate common understanding among disarmament experts in Geneva? This is the question **Andrew Webster** addresses in his article "The Transnational Dream," which parallels the work of Clavin and Wessels (discussed above) in outlining out the structures and bureaucracy of the League's disarmament work.²³ Webster points to the striking continuity of many national arms experts delegated to Geneva, foremost among them Britain's Lord Robert Cecil and France's Edouard Réquin. Cecil showed a striking willingness to act independently of London, putting forward numerous schemes in first half of the 1920s designed to link disarmament to mutual security pacts (number 5 on Webster's taxonomy).²⁴ But the great powers were little inclined to resolve their differences under League auspices, as demonstrated by the independent negotiations between London, Paris and Berlin leading up to Locarno in 1925. What the great powers could give – in terms of cooperation and optimism – they could also take away, as seen in the spectacular breakdown of the World Disarmament Conference of 1932-34. The security work of the League was of little consequence one way or another. Webster concludes: "Floating on such tides, the disarmament 'community' in Geneva was ultimately little more than flotsam and jetsam."²⁵

Considering that neither the great powers (as per Webster) nor the small powers (as per Stone) really placed much trust in the League for security, it is hardly surprising that Cecil's grand schemes came to naught. What does demand further explanation is the League's greatest disarmament failure, the botched containment of Germany in the 1920s. In a marvelous example of history informed by contemporary events, **Martin Alexander** and **John F. V. Keiger** have put forward an incisive comparison between the handling of two pariah states – Germany in 1919 and Iraq in 1991. There is no space here to consider

²² Stone, "Imperialism and Sovereignty," 222.

²³ 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 (November 2005): 493-518. doi: 10.1017/S0960777305002730. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0960777305002730>. This article appears in a special issue of *ConEH* focusing on the transnational history of interwar Europe, edited by Patricia Clavin and Jens-Wilhelm Wessels.

²⁴ See also a further publication by Webster: "Making Disarmament Work: The Implementation of the International Disarmament Provisions in the League of Nations Covenant, 1919-1925," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 16,3 (2005): 551-569. doi: 10.1080/09592290500208089. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592290500208089>.

²⁵ Webster, "The Transnational Dream," 517.

in detail each article edited by Alexander and Keiger in the April 2006 issue of the *Journal of Strategic Studies*. **Philip Towle** writes on the general principle of “forced disarmament”; **Edward Spiers** on the practical difficulties of outlawing chemical weapons production; **David Stevenson** and **Peter Jackson** on British and French security policy, respectively.

Perhaps the most fundamental point of contention among these authors is whether France was right to use the League in pursuit of the “moral disarmament” of Germany. **Andrew Barros**, in his illuminating article “Disarmament as a Weapon,” suggests that French military observers had impossibly high expectations. Every hint of a persistent “Prussian mentality” was registered with nervousness; even physical fitness classes or even the teaching of patriotic songs provided cause for alarm.²⁶ British military observers, by contrast, took pains to avoid the “appearance of vindictiveness,” and they consistently overlooked what they took to be minor transgressions of the Treaty of Versailles. Barros is persuasive in outlining the downside of France’s nebulous insistence on “moral disarmament.” But not all French demands appear unreasonable. Surely the League had compelling reasons to conduct surprise inspections at German factories? The Inter-Allied Military Control Commission (IMCC), which *did* undertake inspections in the early 1920s, found its work stymied by an alarming degree of German obstructionism. **Philip Towle** shares the harrowing details in his contribution on “forced disarmament.” At a time when German manufacturers and military representatives were, in fact, conspiring to sidestep provisions of the Versailles Treaty, Germans collaborating with the IMCC might wind up dead.²⁷ Though Towle is doubtful of the long-term viability of forced disarmament, his article illustrates the enormity of the problem of German revisionism. Under what circumstances can one imagine any outside party, including the League, successfully transforming the culture of revisionism in Germany? Absent such a transformation, the physical constraints applied by the League and the victorious powers were almost a secondary consideration.

If, in the end, German cultural attitudes were of such fundamental significance for the international system in the 1920s, it makes sense to cast a look at the behavior of civil society. A recent article by **Iris Borowy** illustrates this approach, highlighting the striking ambivalence of German doctors and scientists toward international organizations in the era of Versailles.²⁸ Viewing their work as an extension of German national

²⁶ Barros, “Disarmament as a Weapon: Anglo-French Relations and the Problem of Enforcing German Disarmament, 1919-28,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, 2 (April 2006): 301-321; here esp. 304, 312. doi: 10.1080/01402390600585159. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402390600585159>. Barros makes effective use here of French intelligence reports.

²⁷ Philip Towle, “Forced Disarmament in the 1920s and After,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, 2 (April 2006): 323-344; here esp. 334-37. doi: 10.1080/01402390600585167. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402390600585167>.

²⁸ Iris Borowy, “Wissenschaft, Gesundheit, Politik. Das Verhältnis der Weimarer Republik zur Hygieneorganisation des Völkerbundes,” *Sozial.Geschichte* 20, 1 (2005): 30-56. A more technical article by

interests, these professionals filed reports to Berlin on every meeting of the League of Nations Health Organization. During moments of diplomatic crisis, such as the Ruhr occupation of 1923, they suspended participation in the LNHO. After Locarno and Germany's formal accession to the League, German scientists cheerfully hosted international delegations on lengthy tours of the country's hospital and research facilities. Such cooperation had shallow roots, though: when the Third Reich steered a course toward autarky in the fall of 1933, no known protests were recorded by the medical community, which walked away from a decade of work in the LNHO with scarcely a murmur. Overall, German experts were willing to use League organizations to further their own purposes, but they had scarcely internalized the values of international work for its own sake. One searches in vain for a "League spirit" in this milieu.²⁹

Borowy's work points to the great possibilities that can arise from blurring the needlessly sharp boundary between "international cultural history" and the broader sweep of international diplomacy.³⁰ The behavior of German experts in cultural, scientific, and humanitarian organizations cannot be understood independently of their country's geopolitical situation; conversely, the intensity of German revisionism is most strikingly revealed in the attitudes displayed outside official circles. The idea that "transnational" history takes place independently of nation-states is seldom borne out upon closer inspection. For similar reasons, few transnational actors can be understood without some reference to their countries of origin. This applies to all of the major figures discussed in the articles covered here: Ludwik Rajchman, Giovanni Ciralo, Meinoud Rost van Tonningen, Sir Robert Cecil. There is ample reason to focus more attention on these and comparable figures.³¹ Their service outside the classic career paths of foreign ministries allowed them to develop complex and unusual international relationships. Understanding these cross-linkages, unfolding in Geneva, Paris, and other major centers of commerce

Pauline Mazumdar makes a similar point about German medicine: despite evidence that a German-developed procedure for diagnosing syphilis was costly and not accurate enough, German doctors clung to their method as a matter of prestige. "In the Silence of the Laboratory': The League of Nations Standardizes Syphilis Tests," *Social History of Medicine* 16, 3 (2003): 437-459. doi: 10.1093/shm/16.3.437. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/shm/16.3.437> .

²⁹ For further discussion of German attitudes toward the League across the party-political spectrum, see Joachim Wintzer, *Deutschland und der Völkerbund 1918-1926* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006).

³⁰ For all the high quality of the "culture and international history" workshops held in Germany over the past several years, they have been marked at times by an excessive desire to draw a sharp distance from the sphere of diplomacy. An excellent introduction to this genre remains Jessica Gienow-Hecht and Frank Schumacher, eds., *Culture and International History* (New York: Berghahn, 2003).

³¹ Of this group, only Rajchman has already found a biographer; see Marta Balinska, *For the Good of Humanity: Ludwik Rajchman, Medical Statesman*, trans. Rebecca Howell (New York: Central European University Press, 1998); orig. *Une vie pour l'humanitaire. Ludwik Rajchman, 1881-1965* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995).

and diplomacy, will certainly deepen our knowledge of international relations in the interwar era.

Conclusion

The articles discussed here present but a sub-set of relevant publications in the past few years, so any conclusions drawn here must be suggestive rather than definitive. Significant facets of the League's work, above all its colonial mandate system, have scarcely featured in recent journal publications.³² This may point to a slight turn by international historians away from the internal dynamics of imperialism and toward the study of inter-imperial, interstate and intercultural relations. Do journal articles serve as early indicators of the direction of the field? Contributors to the *International History Spotlight* may have more to say on this count as the service unfolds its journal-oriented coverage in the years to come.

For the time being, certain issues do leap out of the articles discussed above. First, there appears to be a sizeable number of transnational actors who merit fuller consideration as historians seek to incorporate the work of the League into more conventional accounts of the interwar period. Second, in extending its reach into various fields of diplomacy and humanitarian assistance, the League's most effective lever was technical work – gathering and publishing statistics; registering refugees or Chinese “slave girls”; certifying drug exports; and preparing the reports that would serve as the basis for discussion at higher levels. Glamorous it was not, but historians are clearly right to pay heed to this activity. Such research helps to underscore the final and most significant point, namely, that the cultural and political dimensions of international diplomacy need not be treated in isolation from one another. The economic, humanitarian, and security work of the League did not proceed with complete autonomy. In the end, the “many” Leagues of Nations rose and fell together.

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³² One exception bears mention here: Véronique Dimier, “L'internationalisation' du débat colonial. Rivalités franco-britanniques autour de la commission permanente des mandats,” *Outre-mers* 89, 2 (2002): 333-360. Also relevant – at least in terms of assessing public opinion in Britain – is Daniel Gorman, “Liberal Internationalism, the League of Nations Union, and the Mandates System,” *Canadian Journal of History* 40, 3 (December 2005): 499-477.