

2010

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Review

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/>

Published on **7 July 2010**

H-Diplo Review Editor: Diane Labrosse

H-Diplo Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse

H-Diplo has commissioned reviews of the Makers of the Modern World Series (Haus Publishing), which concerns the Peace Conferences of 1919-23 and their aftermath. The 32 volumes are structured as biographies in standard format or as specific national/organizational histories.
<http://www.hauspublishing.com/product/229>

H-Diplo Dual Book Review of:

Anthony Lentin. *General Smuts: South Africa.* (Makers of the Modern World Series), Haus Publishing, 2010. Pp.xvii+221 pp. Map, photograph, notes, chronology, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-90579182-8.

Ruth Henig. *The League of Nations.* (Makers of the Modern World Series), Haus Publishing, 2010. Pp. viii + 240pp. Maps, notes, chronology, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-905791-75-0.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Haus-SouthAfrica-League.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Carole K. Fink**, The Ohio State University

These two books, part of a thirty-two volume series on the post-World War I treaties, form an instructive pair, written by specialists who have approached their subjects with verve and enthusiasm as well as erudition.

Jan Christian Smuts (1870-1950) still occupies a major place in South African and British Imperial as well as in European International history. The daring and learned Boer general, who in 1902 was forced to surrender to British arms but three years later engineered self-government for the Transvaal and Orange Free State and in 1910 the quasi independent Union of South Africa, in World War I was both a renowned imperial military officer and an esteemed member of Britain's war cabinet, charged with major responsibilities and several delicate political missions.

Anthony Lentin, author of two books on David Lloyd George and a self-professed critic of Versailles (ix), has framed his work around Smuts's uniquely "principled, level-headed, and far-sighted" role at the peace conference (x). Over half of Lentin's study is centered

on the debates over the German treaty, during which the 49-year-old South African sought a just settlement based on Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and buttressed by his admiration for the "peace of reconciliation" that he believed had been forged between Briton and Boer in his homeland. Using copious quotations from private correspondence, official documents, memoirs, and speeches (all presented in italics), Lentin traces Smuts's descent over seven months from his "pride and optimism" (50) on the day of the armistice to his bitter disappointment on June 28, 1919 at the "uninspired, unimpressive, mechanical, soulless" (112) atmosphere in Versailles.

Smuts, according to Lentin, was a practical visionary who had clearly recognized the political as well as material consequences of World War I. The destruction of four empires, the emergence of small, militaristic states, and the looming threats in the East of bolshevism, hunger, and disease had made it imperative to maintain Allied solidarity and create a robust new world organization but also "to reconcile Germany and 'the new Europe' for their mutual and common salvation." (51)

Smuts's signal contribution to peacemaking came from his pamphlet, *The League of Nations: A Practical Suggestion*. Endorsed by both Lloyd George and Wilson, Smuts's ideas entered the Covenant as Articles 2 to 5 (the Assembly and Council), Article 8 (disarmament), Articles 12 and 13 (international arbitration), Articles 15 and 16 (sanctions) and Article 22 (Mandates) (59). At the same time Smuts served the Union faithfully by securing a "C" Mandate (only a veiled replacement for virtual control) over German South-West Africa but was thwarted by the prime minister and president from his dreams of giving South Africa an even larger "natural frontier ... of sub-tropical territory." (61).

Trouble began in Paris in late March when Smuts, returning from London after recovering from influenza, discovered that the Big Three had not only streamlined their deliberations but were planning to amputate German territory, occupy the Rhineland, strip German military power, and accede to a volatile territorial settlement in the lands between the Reich and Soviet Russia. In response to his blunt objections, his British chiefs dispatched him to Budapest on a futile mediating mission, during which Smuts witnessed the raging nationalisms and hunger in East-Central Europe. Then came another shock. Torn between his earlier cautions against demanding huge reparations from Germany and Lloyd George's political need to increase Britain's share, Smuts served the prime minister (and sorely diminished his own reputation) by drafting the legal justification for London's problematic claims for military pensions and separation allowances, a formulation that persuaded Wilson but ultimately doomed the possibility of achieving a workable German indemnity at the Paris Peace Conference. In May after the German delegation arrived in Paris, Smuts returned to the offensive, bombarding Lloyd George and Wilson with criticisms and suggestions for revision, only to be coldly rebuffed.

Lentin is largely sympathetic toward Smuts's "wise, far-sighted, and accurate" objections (90), and to his futile last-minute proposal to Lloyd George to conduct "direct

negotiations” with the Germans. Yet the author concedes that the peacemakers, holding quite different views of the recent enemy and fearing to reopen their contentious decisions (which “would have torn the treaty apart,” 90), had to refuse. Smuts’s last detailed protest before the British Empire delegation on May 30 over the betrayal of a “Wilson peace” was deftly parried by Lloyd George’s rejoinder: that the U.S. president himself saw no violation of the Fourteen Points in the final document. Crushed politically and personally, Smuts reluctantly placed his signature on the Versailles treaty for supremely practical reasons: “to validate the legal recognition of South Africa’s independent statehood,” to support Prime Minister Botha, and also to “seal South Africa’s title as the Mandatory for South-West Africa (p. 111). Although he withheld public criticism, he stated that “that the real work of making peace [would] only begin after this Treaty has been signed.” (113)

Underscoring Smuts’s verdict, Lentin terms Versailles “not so much a peace as a standing provocation,” which “from its inception ... contained *the roots of war*” (118), weakening the authority of new Weimar Republic and inhibiting the stabilization of Europe, particularly after America’s repudiation of the treaty and the League. Only reluctantly does Lentin admit two large failings in Smuts’s arguments: his deep-seated antipathy toward France and its desire for security (121) and his conviction that applying the “contagion of magnanimity” applied by Britain toward the “plucky [Boer] republics” would have similarly mollified a defeated, resentful, and still powerful Germany (119-20).

Smuts’s later years were marked both by nation building in South Africa and an intense involvement in European affairs, where he continued to advocate the appeasement of Germany, even after the Nazi seizure of power. “Appalled at Hitler’s brutal take-over of Austria,” he nonetheless “opposed any British guarantee to Czechoslovakia;” but the occupation of Prague “stripped the veil from his eyes.” (132) turning Smuts away from neutrality and toward entering war on Britain’s side. Now 69 and prime minister of South Africa, Smuts again played a major military, diplomatic, and inspirational role in World War II as a deft Allied leader and one of Churchill’s most stalwart comrades. At war’s end, the elderly statesman was alarmed by the outbreak of the Cold War, and unimpressed with the new United Nations, which, from the start challenged the Union’s hold over South-West Africa. Smuts was driven from office by the 1948 elections that brought the Apartheid regime to power followed by South Africa’s exit from the British Commonwealth in 1961 and its almost global isolation until 1994.

Lentin’s balance sheet on Smuts’s accomplishments is strongly positive: “an enlightened, courageous, noble-minded [man] of the twentieth century,” whose “pervasive belief in ‘reconciliation’ and in ‘the contagion of magnanimity’ live on in South Africa in men like Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu” (153) - if not in many of his own countrymen. Lentin, who dismisses the “anachronistic and unhistorical” judgments of Smuts’s abiding racism toward South African Blacks and Indians (x) and acknowledges Smuts’s aspirations and his failure to achieve a Greater South Africa along with his lifelong inability to reconcile Boer and Briton, has depicted a singular internationalist

who, with less malice than Keynes but with a vision limited by his Anglo-German sympathies, laid bare the weaknesses of Versailles and its authors.

Smuts's creation, the League of Nations, has long reaped mixed reviews by politicians and historians based largely on its failures to enforce or revise the peace treaties in the 1920s and to prevent a Second World War in the 1930s. **Ruth Henig**, a specialist in 20th century international and League history, has produced a compact and valuable study that both acknowledges the weaknesses and points out the enduring accomplishments.

Beginning with the League's intellectual, political, and institutional origins in the 19th century, Henig then describes the emergence of an Anglo-French-and American consensus during World War I on the need for an international organization to arbitrate disputes and stave off another resort to arms. She also underlines the key differences among the three wartime partners: While Britain was insistent on creating an international process of conciliation and delay and France on organizing diplomatic, legal, economic, and military sanctions against aggressors, Woodrow Wilson put forward a vaster and more problematic Western hemisphere model - forging a collective guarantee of the territorial integrity and independence of all members - that would mark the League's entire history.

Unlike earlier studies of the League of Nations, Henig has written a general diplomatic history of the interwar period in which the organization frequently took second place to Allied decision making. Beginning with the contentious drafting of the Covenant in Paris and the "faltering start" in Geneva after the U.S. repudiation of the Versailles treaty, Henig examines four decisive challenges - Corfu, Disarmament, Manchuria, and Abyssinia - during which the League blatantly fell short of its political mandate. Yet in her all too brief final chapter - an account of the League's non-political and humanitarian legacy that was passed on to the United Nations in 1946, Henig, citing Lord Cecil in 1946 as well as recent scholarship since the end of the Cold War, prefers not to "dwell on its weaknesses or condemn its failures ... but applaud its successes while continuing to learn important lessons from its history" (187).

Questions remain. Was the League simply doomed from the start, because of its link to the Versailles treaty, its contentious clauses, and its lack of universal membership? Was this League - which, in Lloyd George's memorable words in April 1919, was needed to "remedy ... repair and redress" the peace settlement (47) - ever robust enough also to resolve unforeseen international disputes and (with its modest budget and personnel) to police the most contentious decisions made in Paris, such as the protection of minorities, the supervision of Mandates, the Saar and Danzig, keeping track of the armaments and drug trade, and the protection of endangered women and children?

Henig's evidence largely provides negative answers to these questions. Without U.S. support, Britain shrank from the burdens of Article 10 and constantly sought alternate means of maintaining peace, while France obsessively sought security by concluding

alliances and attempting to plug the gaps in the covenant. Unable to work out their fundamental differences, the ex-Entente left the League vulnerable to its humiliating experiences in 1923, 1931, and 1936 and to its dreary and futile labors for disarmament. Indeed, when the “old diplomacy,” which had never disappeared after World War I, took center stage after 1933 the League became not only a sorry relic of the Peace Conference but also one of the scapegoats for the outbreak of World War II. The United Nations, which adopted many of the League’s forms and functions but was “a free-standing organization” and “not ...the guardian of the post-Second War territorial settlement” (183), nonetheless suffered a similar form of marginalization during the Cold War. Despite its unquestionable humanitarian accomplishments, the UN has yet to show its potency in the political realm.

Perhaps the only “lesson” to be drawn from the struggle over Versailles and the history of the failed League - as highlighted in these two fine books – is the impossibility of reconciling international solidarity with the power of political and patriotic interests, something neither Smuts nor the League’s leaders were able to accomplish.

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