



The League of Nations in History

BY

PROFESSOR A. F. POLLARD

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THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS IN HISTORY

THERE has probably never been a time in human history in which verbal homage has not been paid to the blessings of peace; and no conqueror has been so warlike but he has professed it his ultimate object. Even Napoleon was fond of expounding at St. Helena his life-long plan for perpetual peace. Men have only differed over the means of securing it. To the conqueror the obvious means have always seemed to be the conquest of his enemies and the supremacy of his will; and sometimes peace has been secured in this way. Alexander the Great nearly established it for a brief moment before his death, and Rome succeeded by means of her Empire in maintaining peace, except for border and occasional civil wars, throughout the civilized world for centuries. That peace haunted the Middle Ages, and the Papacy—‘the ghost of the Roman Empire sitting enthroned on the ruins thereof’—sought to maintain it by its spiritual authority. But the decline of the Catholic ideal of unity in the civilized world, and the rise of the independent national State which brought the Middle Ages to a close, banished perhaps for ever

that solution of the problem, and presented it under the modern form of how to create peace out of the conflict of national or dynastic ambitions.

The national State emerged from the Middle Ages under the guise and guidance of personal monarchy and amid the clash of religious wars which followed upon the break-down of Catholic unity under the Papacy. But Wars of Religion, despite the proverbial bitterness of theological hatred, proved more amenable to pacific treatment than dynastic or commercial rivalry; and, owing either to the competition of these other antagonisms or to the realization that war after all could not solve theological problems, the era of religious wars closed in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia. But the ink was hardly dry on that treaty of peace when two Protestant republics, England and Holland, flew at one another's throats over the carrying-trade of the world, and the city of London responded to the cry *delenda est Carthago* in the interests of the Navigation Acts. The combatants paid the price for their strife in the common terror with which the dynastic ambition of Louis XIV soon inspired them, and that danger was only laid, after a generation of European war, at the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713.

The cost of these wars had by now begun to produce some impression on the minds of men. Efforts, indeed, had long been made to limit the injury and the suffering they involved, and early in the seventeenth

century Grotius strove to systematize previous attempts to create an international law; but the fact that its problems remain to-day essentially what they were in the sixteenth century shows how little progress has been made; and the mixture of literature and ethics which we call International Law still lacks the sanction to give it any real effect. Academic attempts to create an international force behind it were occasionally made in the seventeenth century. In his old age Sully, the great minister of Henri IV, or perhaps the Abbé who edited Sully's memoirs, concocted a fiction according to which Queen Elizabeth proposed to Henri IV a 'grand design', nominally to ensure the peace of Europe, but really to control the House of Austria; and in 1713 the Abbé de St. Pierre, who was secretary to the French plenipotentiary at the peace of Utrecht, propounded a further scheme for a League of Princes with a more impartial object. The presidency of the League was to be held by each great Prince in turn, the differences between the contracting parties were to be settled by arbitration or judicial decision at a congress of plenipotentiaries, and the League was to impose by force of arms the common will upon recalcitrant States.

Congresses did in fact become the order of the day. One sat, formally at least, at Brunswick for years to settle the affairs of Northern Europe; another sat, or as Carlyle puts it 'endeavoured to get seated',

for two years (1722-4) at Cambrai, and then had 'the floor pulled from under it' by a clandestine agreement between two of the participants; a third gathered with no better success at Soissons in 1728-9. 'You must', Cardinal Fleury had said to the Abbé de St. Pierre, 'begin by sending a troop of missionaries to prepare the hearts and minds of the contracting sovereigns'; and there was little prospect of a League of Nations to secure peace so long as nations were ruled by irresponsible monarchs and States were regarded as their personal property. For greed acts with directer force upon an individual than upon the average member of a community, and the proprietary notion of the State gave its owner a personal interest in its aggrandizement which was fatal to all schemes for preventing wars of aggression.

The futility of the early eighteenth-century Congresses was followed by another series of wars, and it was not until the anti-monarchical movement of thought, stimulated by the American War of Independence, gathered force, that a more democratic conception of the 'European Republic', as St. Pierre had called it, became possible. Voltaire and Rousseau in France, Bentham in England, and even Kant in Germany advocated more popular forms of government than paternal despotism as essential to the maintenance of international peace. But the French Revolution, pacifist though it was, like the Russian revolution, in its earlier stages, provoked a conflict

with monarchical Europe, and under the stress of War became as militarist as its opponents. Europe was to be forcibly converted to belief in the doctrines of the Revolution, and the forcible conversion became in the hands of Napoleon a military conquest, with peace dependent upon acquiescence in his arbitrary will. The problem of peace by consent seemed as far from solution as in the days of the Roman Empire.

But nationality had, since the Middle Ages, acquired a strength which even Napoleon could not destroy. No national State has been permanently crushed by force of arms, save Poland, since the national State was evolved; and the moral of the Napoleonic wars is that peace must depend for its security and its permanence not upon conquest but upon consent between indestructible nations. Europe took some steps towards the realization of this condition after Napoleon's fall, but the success of its efforts was impaired by discord over the means by which peace was to be enforced and over the articles of the European association. The Restoration was not merely one of peace after the Napoleonic wars but one of legitimist government after the Revolution and the *régime* of Napoleonic upstarts; and the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15 was distracted by the two diverse aspects of the problem before it. It was a Congress of princes, not of peoples, and most Sovereigns were not unnaturally convinced, after

their recent experience, that war was the outcome of revolution, and that peace could be best preserved by providing against insurrection. This line of thought led to the Holy Alliance, which has almost by common consent been confused with the Quadruple Alliance of the four great Powers, Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria, which overthrew Napoleon and actually kept the peace for some years after his fall.

The Holy Alliance was inspired by the Tsar Alexander, a monarch with a mind almost as nebulous as that of his latest successor. He was not without liberal leanings, he was devoted to mystical piety, and even talked of the sacred rights of humanity. But he could not help being an autocrat even though he regarded himself as merely a vicar of God, the only Sovereign of the world. On 26th September, 1815, he persuaded his Prussian and Austrian colleagues to sign with him the Act of the Holy Alliance, in which they spoke of their peoples as being branches of one Christian nation, announced their conviction that States no less than individuals were bound by the precepts of Christianity, promised to regulate thereby their domestic and foreign policy, and undertook to render each other assistance in every case and in every place. It was to be a universal union of Christian fathers of national families, and George IV and the Pope were the only Christian princes who did not subscribe. But the Holy Alliance effected nothing. It held no Congresses, passed no executive

measures, developed no machinery, and left the practical work of maintaining peace to the Quadruple Alliance.

This was a businesslike combination more to the taste of Castlereagh and the British Government. It was formulated at Chaumont, in March 1814, by Great Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria, and was confirmed with additions and modifications at various times until it received its final shape at the Second Treaty of Paris on November 20, 1815. The four Great Powers bound themselves not by a vague confession of Legitimist faith, but by specific agreements, and arranged to meet at periodic congresses to transact their business. At the first of these Congresses, held at Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818, France was admitted to the circle and the Quadruple became the Quintuple Alliance. Castlereagh was enthusiastic over its prospects; he hailed the system of periodic congresses as 'a new discovery' in the art of government, 'at once extinguishing the cobwebs with which diplomacy obscures the horizon, bringing the whole bearing of the system into its true light, and giving to the counsels of the Great Powers the efficiency and almost the simplicity of a single State'.

But the single State was not so simple as he thought. It depended for its continuance upon a common will, and that common will could only be found in a compromise between the reaction of Metternich and the comparative liberalism of Castlereagh.

The Tsar held the balance, and it was upset when a series of more or less revolutionary manifestations in Germany and elsewhere, followed by a mutiny of his own Guards in 1820, perverted Alexander to the reactionary cause and threw him into the arms of Metternich. A schism among the Great Powers appeared at the Congress of Troppau in 1820 and was widened at that of Verona in 1823. France developed a disinclination to see reaction re-established in Italy by Austrian arms, and Great Britain to seeing it re-established in Spain (and still more in the Spanish American Colonies) by French arms. On that question Canning broke away from the Quintuple Alliance and sought the support of President Monroe; and a New World was called in to redress the balance of the Old. The French Revolution of 1830 finally severed France from the cause of reaction, and the Quintuple Alliance was thus reduced to a Triple Alliance of the three autocrats of Russia, Prussia, and Austria, who had signed the original Holy Alliance. This tended to create and perpetuate the confusion between the two Alliances, and to saddle British statesmen like Castlereagh, who made the Quadruple Alliance, with the odium of reaction attaching to the Holy Alliance which they refused to join.

Shorn of the Liberal elements in their coalition, the three autocracies continued to repress reform and thus to provoke revolution until the general conflagration of 1848. Their conduct made the

confederation of Europe a byword, and nationalism enlisted under Canning's standard of 'Every nation for itself, and God for us all'. Governments had to purge themselves of autocracy before the nations would favour their combination; peoples might combine themselves, but they had no love for a combination of masters.

It was, however, no easy thing for democracies to combine. We have seen that the destruction of autocracy in Russia does not produce popular unanimity even within a single State; still less has the reduction of Turkey in Europe conduced to harmony among the Balkan peoples. Autocracy was restored again in Austria after 1848 because its various races fought one another instead of combining against their common master, and it recovered in Germany because the German tribes could not unite on a basis of Parliamentary self-government.

Such efforts as were made in the latter half of the nineteenth century to internationalize Europe were due to sectional impulse. There was the attempt of governments and diplomatists, without much popular backing, to create and maintain a Concert of Europe; there was the middle-class and commercial movement towards Free Trade; and there was the International Socialist tendency which was directed not so much against war as against capitalism. The only political system which approached the idea of a League of

Nations was the British Empire, and it achieved success, not by the amalgamation of independent units, but by their decentralization; a like solution may emerge from the turmoil in Russia and in the Hapsburg dominions, and possibly Scandinavia, through the separation of Norway and Sweden, may have obtained a somewhat similar international understanding.

It is clear that a League of Nations cannot be based on the German idea of the State. The State, according to Treitschke, is might, and has 'the right to merge into one the nationalities contained within itself'. It is not by the repression, but only by the expression, of nationality that a League of Nations can be formed; for nationality has come to stay, and the purport of a League of Nations is to provide means for the expression of nationality in any form but war. Youthful exuberance tends to express itself in combat, but in maintaining peace we direct the vigour of men into more fruitful channels than mutual destruction. The national State is built on that foundation; but so far we have failed in the international sphere, and war has perverted colossal energies from constructive to destructive purposes. The failure in the nineteenth century was largely due to a perversion of the Balance of Power. To Castlereagh and his colleagues that phrase meant the 'just repartition of force amongst the States of Europe', a sort of rationing of power by agreement;

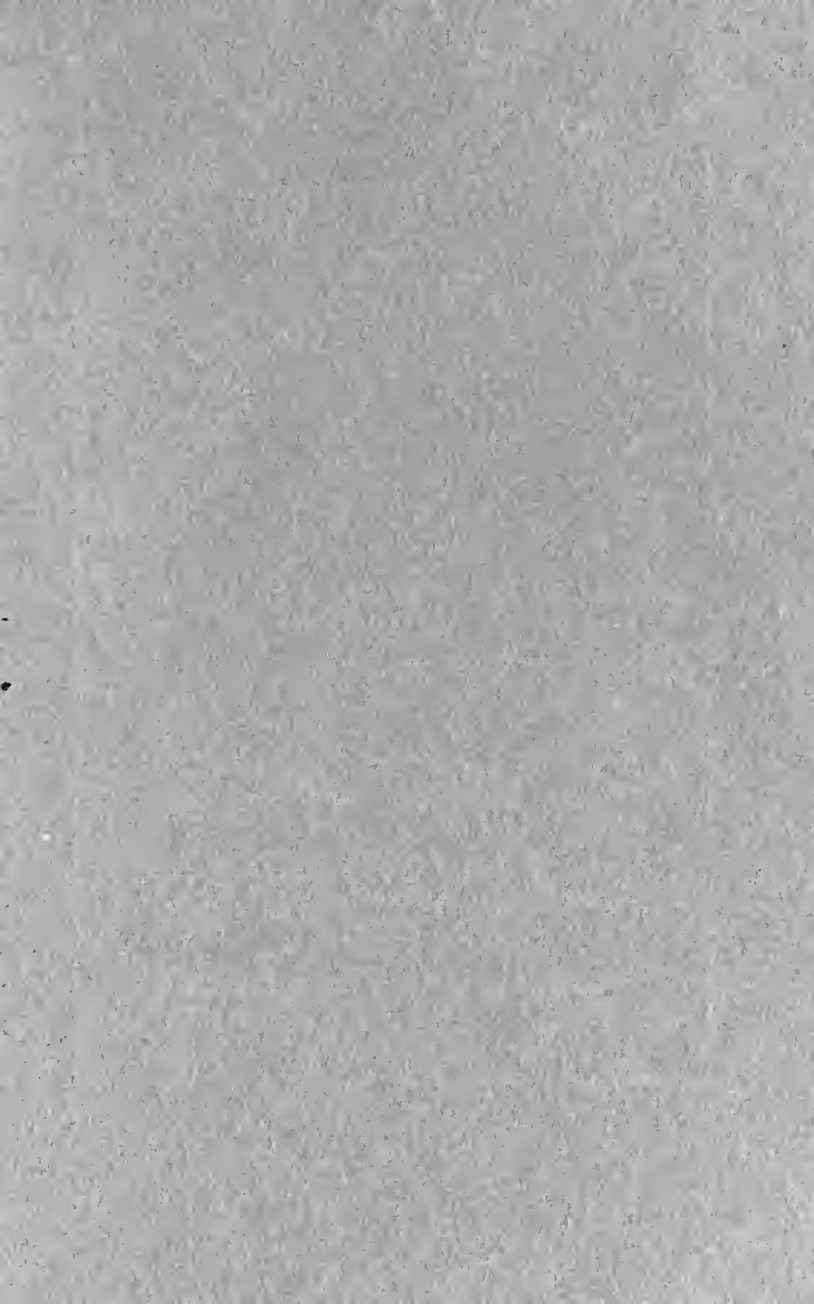
it has come to mean a balance between two groups of Allies, or in other words between two parties which, in the absence of a controlling common will or super-State, involves a permanent race for armaments breaking out into recurrent civil war.

The Triple Alliance was one League of Nations, the Entente was another; and the present conflict proves their futility as Leagues of Peace, for if it takes two to make a quarrel, it takes two to keep the peace, and no League of Nations can keep the peace if there is another bent on war. The Concert of Europe broke down like the Quintuple Alliance because of the lack of a common will.

To the organization of that common will many efforts in recent times have been directed. It will not come through the conquest of others unless we also conquer ourselves. The British Empire is an example because England conquered its will to dominate its Dominions; but while an example, it is not an alternative, to the League of Nations, and it would cease to be even an example if it were used to dominate others. An even better example is the peace we have had for a century on the frontier of the United States and Canada without any cost in life, limb, or treasure, because the two peoples had conquered their aggressive impulse, and left that frontier undefended except by moral restraint. Peace by forbearance can, however, only be made between those who consent to forbear, and constraint by force

is the only remedy for those who cannot or will not restrain themselves.

The League of Nations, if it is to succeed, must be based upon a common will to maintain the peace, and a common readiness to repress the ambitions of those who seek to break it. No League has yet succeeded because men have hitherto built their States and Churches on their difference from other men; and he who would found a League of Nations must base it on their common interest in peace. Instead of a balance, we need a community, of power, with no immunity for any one from its obligations and its responsibilities.



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