Introduction

The high contracting parties,
In order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security
by the acceptance of obligations not to resort to war,
by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations,
by the firm establishment of the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments, and
by the maintenance of justice and a scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations
in the dealings of organised peoples with one another,
Agree to this Covenant of the League of Nations.¹

Thus begins the Covenant of the League of Nations of 1919. At the outset of the preamble, the Covenant stipulated the obligation of states not to resort to war as a means to preserve peace. For the first time, war – more precisely, initiating war – was in effect made illegal and the idea of collective security was institutionalised.² It was, historians have tended to suggest, achieved due to war-weariness, the horrors of the long, grinding war, great-power diplomacy or the personal project of the US President Woodrow Wilson.³ While all these factors played important roles in

¹ The Covenant of the League of Nations, the Avalon Project, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp.
In war-time Britain, the development of the league of nations movement from a small circle of elite intellectuals to a mass movement was never smooth, straightforward or driven by purely utopian ideals. Because historians have largely neglected the contribution of this expanding movement to post-war peacemaking, two misunderstandings persist about the role of the movement. The first is that scholars have labelled it utopian. Historians and international relations theorists have tended to dismiss the leading pro-league thinkers as starry-eyed idealists. This book challenges that received wisdom by tracing the ideas of the leading members of the pro-league movement, especially those of the Bryce Group, one of the first pro-league circles in Britain, and its successor, the League of Nations Society, up to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. This analysis offers a fresh assessment of liberal internationalism in the early twentieth century – the intellectual foundation of the pro-league movement in Britain and the League of Nations, which defied such clear-cut categories as utopian or realist. To reveal the neglected evolution of ideas during the war, this book mainly examines the thinkers who invented the post-war idea and initiated the movement in 1914.

The second misunderstanding is that the movement promoted a purely peaceful ideal and thereby succeeded in receiving the support of the war-weary public at the end of the war. In the actual course of developing the pro-league movement, the more popular and influential

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it became, the less control the original leadership enjoyed over its direction. In popularising their ideas for mass consumption, the pro-leaguers’ original proposal about a post-war organisation lost its nuance and sophistication. Previous works have missed this crucial process of change. The story of the League cannot be understood without recognising the remarkable extent to which the movement transformed its official thinking about a league into something different and unforeseen because of the pressures of public opinion and war-time politics. At the outbreak of the war in 1914, pro-league thinkers identified the divisive international politics of anarchy, the balance of power and rival alliance blocs as the primary causes of war. The goal of founding a league of nations was therefore to reform international relations by introducing a new and cooperative international institution inclusive of all the great powers. Yet, by the end of the war in 1918, the pro-league leaders came to promote what they had originally opposed: the league as a continuation of the wartime alliance against Germany and its allies into the post-war peace.

The shift of the league of nations idea to a continuation of the war-time alliance will also show the little-debated background of the Paris Peace Conference that eventually determined the formation of the League of Nations. Despite the fact that John Maynard Keynes, the economist and a British delegate at Versailles, famously criticised the reparation clauses as unjustified and unworkable, the Peace Settlement imposed harsh

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8 The pro-league thinkers also discussed some of the other causes of war, for example, secret diplomacy, the arms industry and lack of democratic control of foreign policy, but this book examines the thinkers’ main foci, the balance of power and rival alliance blocs, as the key to reforming the international system for future war prevention.

9 As Chapter 5 will show, the league as a continuation of the war-time alliance against Germany was not unanimously upheld by all the pro-league activists. Yet, as this book will demonstrate, as one united movement for the creation of a new organisation, the pro-league movement promoted exclusivity at the end of the war.


and antagonistic terms on Germany. While most of the literature focuses on the diplomacy of peacemaking among the Big Four victors and the question of reparations, the punitive nature of the peace arose from more than just flawed negotiations or poor leadership. As reflected in the peacemaking, there were great domestic demands, at least in Britain, for punishing the enemy country severely and excluding it from a new world order. The prevailing hostile attitude towards Germany – one crucial factor that shaped what historians have evaluated as the defective treaty – was mirrored in the pro-league movement and then at the Peace Conference. Analysis of non-governmental actors, such as the public and popular movements, in addition to high-level policy-making and diplomacy, will yield profound insights into how such actors influenced decision-making and international relations.

In this book, I employ the lower case ‘a league of nations’ to refer to the ideas and movement for such an organisation during the First World War. For the international organisation set up in 1920 in Geneva, I use the customary capitalised ‘League of Nations’. This distinction speaks directly to one of the core themes of this book – the distinction between the foundational ideas of a league and the fate of those ideas in war-time domestic politics and post-war international politics.

Historical interest in the League of Nations has recently revived and expanded to study a whole range of international and transnational themes, in particular, the economic and social spheres of the League’s development. While the establishment of the League paved new ways of conceiving the legality and the legitimacy of war in the


international system, scholarly attention has tended to be deflected away from the organisation’s central founding purpose: the prevention of war.  

Most studies have focused on the period after the Paris Peace Conference of 1919–1920 and only explored the question of how the League was planned for the maintenance of peace from certain angles, especially the diplomacy between the victorious great powers.

When scrutinising the establishment of the first international organisation, it is not surprising that the first strand of scholarship focused on high politics and diplomacy. How the politicians of Britain and the United States negotiated the creation of the League during and after the war, for example, has been thoroughly investigated by Peter Yearwood and George Egerton. These rich and detailed accounts have helped us understand the League as a product of political manipulation, since it was undoubtedly politicians who had the ultimate power to decide what the League would be like in reality. According to Yearwood, the establishment of the League was predominantly ‘a product of British war-time diplomacy’. The formation of the idea and the institution were ‘part of, not apart from, British policy’. His work therefore mostly underestimates how pro-league groups constructed and popularised the idea of a league before it became a central subject in the negotiation of the peace settlement. Yet, in international relations, as Akira Iriye has argued, the issue of peace and world order are very frequently closely related to popular movements, interests, values and  


15 Both Yearwood’s and Egerton’s work have also given much more weight to the inter-war period rather than war time. See, Yearwood, Guarantee of Peace; Egerton, Great Britain and the Creation of the League of Nations.

16 While concentrating on British high politics and diplomacy, Egerton’s book has demonstrated awareness of the relation between the pro-league movement and high politics. For example, the book has indicated that ‘it is necessary to place British debate on the league question in its broader social and strategic context. Not only did the League of Nations movement see the realisation of its immediate goal in the creation of the league at the Paris peace conference, but the ideas of war-time dissenters and proleaguers had a powerful impact on the political attitudes and values of postwar British society’. See Egerton, Great Britain and the Creation of the League of Nations, p. xiii.

17 Yearwood, Guarantee of Peace, pp. 4.
norms as well as power politics. While it is true that politicians eventually decided to build the League, it was the league of nations movement led by the Bryce Group and the League of Nations Society, rather than politicians, that devised the post-war plan for a new order, obtained popular support for it and pushed the league onto the political agenda in Britain and the United States. Interactions with other actors should also be included, given that the movement not only involved some politicians as leading members but also loosely kept some politicians as supporters of the idea. For instance, Willoughby Dickinson, the Liberal MP, was one of the founding members of the pro-league groups; renowned politicians such as Robert Cecil and Edward Grey favoured a broadly defined post-war organisation from the early years of the war.

Moreover, the Phillimore Committee, the Foreign Office’s official study group on the creation of a league of nations, examined the plans by the pro-league groups and reflected them in its official reports of 1918, which provided the basis for the discussion on the League of Nations Covenant at the Paris Peace Conference. Thus, the analysis of policy-making alone cannot reveal the whole picture of how the idea of the post-war organisation developed during the war and in what ways this development contributed to the resulting League of Nations.

In studies of popular movements in Britain, the main attention of historians has been devoted to the Union of Democratic Control, the most well-known radical group active during the war. The Union, which called for an end to secret diplomacy as well as for the democratic control of foreign policy by Parliament, has aroused scholarly interest due to its primarily political ambitions. Led by politically active journalist E. D. Morel and Labour MP Ramsay MacDonald, the Union of Democratic Control was not only a part of what A. J. P. Taylor has described as the ‘trouble makers’ of foreign policy dissenters but was also...
firmly set against the Liberal cabinet at the point of the group’s foundation in 1914. The League of Nations Union, the largest pro-league group in Britain, formed in 1918 as a consequence of the amalgamation of two pro-league groups, the League of Nations Society and the League of Free Nations Association, has been examined by Donald S. Birn and Helen McCarthy. Both authors, however, focus on the Union’s main activities in the inter-war period rather than its emergence during the First World War. Although some scholars, such as Henry R. Winkler and Keith Robbins, have studied the war-time league movement, they have tended to overlook how the movement interacted with domestic and international politics. Such interactions were, in fact, pivotal to the building of ideas about a post-war organisation and the public attitudes towards it. In a transnational context, the pro-league movement as a network of several countries’ intellectuals and activists has been analysed by Carl Bouchard, Stephen Wertheim and Warren Kuehl. Although these works have suggested the importance of the transnational dimension, we still know little about how and to what extent pro-league activists and their post-war plans influenced those beyond borders and led to collaboration with others. As Chapter 4 will show, exploring such aspects of the pro-league movement will illuminate how ideas and ideals simultaneously provided inspiration and generated friction across boundaries.

The founding thinkers behind the league have frequently been dismissed by scholars as ‘utopian’ or ‘pacifist’ – in other words, ivory-tower thinkers who had no sense of how politics worked in reality. This assertion, that pro-league thinkers were detached from political realism, in part explains why the role of the movement has been long discounted. As Martin Ceadel has noted, however, such conceptual categories are

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23 Taylor, The Trouble Makers.
27 Carr, The Twenty Years’ Crisis, pp. 97–98; Ceadel, Thinking about Peace and War; Laity, The British Peace Movement, introduction and chapter 8; McCarthy, The British People and the League of Nations, p. 135.
ideal types and do not capture the complexity and dilemmas that thinking about international politics must confront. Political theorists, such as Lucian Ashworth and Peter Wilson, in their work on the inter-war years have also argued that those who were labelled realists or idealists held a variety of perspectives and opinions that ranged across the very conceptual divide. As we shall see in Chapter 2, even concepts that appear to be opposing – realism and idealism – are inseparably entwined in the pro-leaguers’ post-war plan for preventing war. Hence, rather than avoiding these categories, this book employs them to understand inconsistencies and the fragile balance incorporated in the ideas about the post-war order. To appreciate how idealism and realism are common core concepts rather than opposing ideas, it is important to study not only what the pro-league thinkers published – something most international relations scholars do – but also their private discussions and correspondence. Building on a study of this private conversation among the leading league activists, this book investigates the ambiguity and ambivalence in early twentieth century thought about international order and particularly the prevention of war. Such ambiguity and ambivalence, as this book will suggest, are inherently part of the original thinking that continues to shape the way in which we think about international politics to this very day.

Even though the pro-league of nations movement has usually been categorised as a peace movement, most of the pro-league activists were 28. 


30 See Chapter 2. Also see Sluga’s analysis of ‘the national and international’ in Glenda Sluga, Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 150.

31 For instance, Wilson, The International Theory of Leonard Woolf; Long and Wilson (eds.), Thinkers of the Twenty Years’ Crisis.

neither pacifists nor opposed to war in all circumstances. Since it aimed to devise a new system to prevent future wars, the pro-league movement should be better understood as a movement for international reform. In Paul Schroeder’s term, the evolution of the pro-league movement embodied the ‘emergence of the new order’. Yet, as he has indicated, this emergence depended on a widespread, collective recognition of the need for it. As this book will illustrate, this recognition was initially shared only among the pro-league activists and a few political figures. By the end of the war, this idea had become sufficiently widespread to bring about a new international order; but in so doing, it took the post-war plan out of the original pro-leaguers’ hands.

A larger transition in international politics was also highlighted by the shift of the pro-league movement’s idea into a league that excluded enemy countries – from the diplomacy of the Concert of European Great Powers in the nineteenth century to the ideological, polarised international politics of the years between the two World Wars and of the Cold War in the twentieth century. A stable order and universal peace were rarely sought beyond European politics. This was true from the nineteenth century to the beginning of the Great War and was grounded in the politics of the balance of power and the notion that war was ‘the continuation of politics by other means’. From the First World War onwards, as Woodrow Wilson and Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin called for ‘new diplomacy’, a world peace constructed upon an ideological framework began to be a central concept in the discussion of

33 See Chapter 3.
Whilst military force remained a vital tool of international politics, how that force would be employed would, as the book demonstrates, never be the same again.

The Great War, producing as it did changes in so many spheres, also left a legacy of what David Stevenson has described as a ‘deeper transformation of western attitudes towards armed conflict’ – in other words, values about the legitimacy of war. Contrary to the accepted narrative, the long, horrible experience of the Great War neither transformed the public attitude into opposition to war in and of itself nor accelerated the development of the pro-league movement. Instead, this book suggests that the experience of the war led not to opposition of war itself but to the conviction that legitimate reasons must be provided for going to war in the future. Before 1914, the reasons for going to war could be varied – conquest, defence and sometimes honour. Fuelled by jingoism and war’s image as something short, heroic and rewarding, the public was not particularly inclined to consider whether there were ‘righteous’ reasons for waging war. As this book illustrates in the case of Britain, but the point is applicable elsewhere too, the experience of the First World War elevated the preservation of peace as the most legitimate moral and ideological reasons for war.

This book investigates the overlooked history of the intellectual origins of the league as an idea and political goal in Britain. The study of intellectuals and their role in ‘the production and circulation’ of values and ideas are vital in the study of the Great War and international relations. It was because the war was ‘a battle of ideas’ from the outset and mobilised intellectuals on an unprecedented scale that their interactions with politicians and the public beyond their borders influenced international affairs.®

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