



Evolution of human rights

End of the League of Nations

Chris Williams:

Hello I'm Chris Williams, a member of the OU module team for A327 and I'm here with my colleague Stuart Mitchell. Today we're talking about the League of Nations with particular reference to the minorities question in interwar Europe and what that can tell us about different kinds of peace and different kinds of peace settlements. I want start by telling you about a book I bought in a second-hand bookshop a few years ago, a small grey paperback with the essential facts about the League of Nations, Geneva 1939 on the front of it. It's the League of Nations annual report for 1939, a classic primary source. I've always liked handbooks and books of rules as primary sources, but I have to admit that in this case I got it largely so that I could point and laugh. There are many pathetic things about the book itself, it's got a big picture of the palace of nations in Geneva in it. Opened in 1936, pretty much at the exact time when the great powers had all given up on the league as a source of peace and were rearming as fast as possible. And there's the errata slip as well, the number of members of the league of nations is at present 54 and not 58 as stated in the first paragraph on page 43. There annual report had even lost track of how quickly they were losing members at that point and the League was dying before the Second World War knocked it on the head. Stuart?

Stuart Mitchell:

Yeah, there's quite a fun albeit rudimentary method of tracking the fortunes of any institution, issue or phenomenon by using a technique called data mining. We can look via the university's website library at the Guardian's database and count the number of references to the League of Nations. So we get numbers like 1600 in 1919, 1455 in 1924, 1300 in 1934 and nearly the same number in 1938 but in 1939 with war on the horizon, the number of mentions plummets, it's only 639. By 1940 it's 238. The League can't keep the peace which is a shame because it's its main raison d'être.

Chris Williams:

Clearly the League was in trouble in 1939 but nevertheless in the handbook we can find more than just that fact. we can find out more about the League itself and the wider context of the 20th century.

Stuart Mitchell:

Let's take for example the book's introduction, and there's a speech there from the Secretary General from 1939 that essentially looks ahead to the United Nations. It comes very close to admitting that the League has failed to keep the peace, describing a period of chaos and anguish through which the world is passing 'beset with dread, lest methods of violence should bring upon it a disastrous war' but it also makes a claim that the everyday work of the League, setting up technical cooperation between states was necessary and a great success and without it, quote: 'no future peace can bear its fruits'. I think that this comes close to admitting there's going to be a period of hiatus, almost certainly a war, before this period of future peace emerges. I think what we need to remember is that this is the official line of the league and even that official line suggests that it is failing as an institution, so it's quite significant in that respect.

Chris Williams:

And I think that introduction sets out a vision that would in fact be later realised in the United Nations. Firstly there's quite a lot of continuity in people between the League of Nations and the United Nations. The first ambassador to the United Nations, was the diplomat Alexander Cadduggen who'd performed a similar role before the war with the League of Nations. If you want, you can check out his career through the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography which you can find online through the OU library. Secondly some League of Nations institutions ended up being carried over to the United Nations, the League Council was very similar to the UN security council who had a core membership of powers which had a veto over proceedings and a fluctuating membership of other less powerful countries. The International Labour Organisation, the ILO, is the same organisation - it was taken over intact by the UN from the League.

Stuart Mitchell:

One of the other things to note is the similarity between the way in which the League was set up and the way in which the United Nations was set up. They both began as effectively victorious allies clubs. The League counts its original veto powers were the US, the British Empire, France, Italy and Japan and the UN perpetuated the first three of those but added instead the USSR and China.

Chris Williams:

So there's continuity between the League and the UN but some things did change and one thing we're going to focus on today that did change is the attitude towards minorities, to minority rights.