



Evolution of human rights

Minority rights in the League of Nations

Chris Williams:

The yearbook sets out the framework for the way the League dealt with minority rights, the first thing it does is list the documents that sets out the rights and they are the peace treaties, peace treaties that ended the First World War signed around Paris in 1919 and 1920. The First World War was ended on a basis allegedly of National self-determination. The principle of National Self-determination implied that it was possible to have an ethnically homogeneous country with its own language and institutions. In practise of course. and Eastern Europe in particular, was far more complicated than that and the successor states to the Austro-Hungarian empire all included national minorities and those minorities' rights were guaranteed by the League's covenant .

Stuart Mitchell:

Well it's quite interesting to see what those rights were, they weren't broad and universal human rights we expect in post 1945 period. They weren't specific a lot of them, for example although we have equality before the law and the equality of civil and political rights which one would expect coming from a 21st century perspective, we also have a right equal to that of other nationals to obtain at our own expense charitable, religious, social or educational institutions and indeed we also have in districts where there is a considerable proportion of the population belonging to the minority, instruction in the state elementary schools will be given in the language of the minority and a fair share of the sums given by the state - municipal or other budgets for occasional religious or charitable purposes will be assumed to the minority. So there are specific, very detailed rights quite unlike things you'd find later in the 20th century?

Chris Williams:

And immediately after those rights we also have on the next page, which says 'Obligations of Minorities' They must cooperate as loyal fellow citizens with the nations to which they now belong. And also if they choose to petition the League of Nations, complaining they're being mistreated, they must never do something in the request of severance of political relations between the minority in question and the state in which it forms a part i.e. they cannot petition for independence, they must stay in the country in which they're currently put. So we have here a set of rights which are set up very much in the context of the political boundaries drawn by the Paris peace treaties and to preserve those peace treaties has the final

settlement in Europe. But, as you might expect, there was a lot of petitioning in the 1920s and 1930s as people took their problems to Geneva to try and get the league to support their complaints against the nations in which they found themselves. One example I picked from the Times in October 1936, an editorial discusses a petition from czech-slovak Germans which is presented as a reasonable demand to have equal rights to primary education and to government jobs.