

# Leagues of Nations

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Of all global trends, the evolution of international order and institutions has inspired some of the highest ideals, while encountering the hardest of realities. In *Governing the World: The History of an Idea*, Columbia University historian Mark Mazower surveys with cool ambivalence the halting development of internationalism over the past two centuries.

He starts with the Congress of Vienna at the end of the Napoleonic wars, when the victorious great powers formed an alliance to preserve the peace and quash revolution. Against the realpolitik of this repressive system arose idealistic counter-schemes for world governance; their forerunner was the vision of perpetual peace outlined by Immanuel Kant, who argued that reason would eventually lead mankind to embrace a “world republic.” Another such visionary was the French philosopher Saint-Simon, who in 1814—as the Congress of Vienna met—proposed a world federation based on new principles of social organization.

The key figures of the nineteenth century, for Mazower, were the prophet of Italian unification Giuseppe Mazzini and the German philosopher Karl Marx. Mazzinian democratic nationalism, with its core principle of the right to self-determination, would be taken up after World War I by Woodrow Wilson; Marx’s communist internationalism led to Vladimir Lenin’s attempt to export revolution worldwide. Thus began a great rivalry “for leadership of the ‘postimperial world’” that would last through the cold war. Mazower highlights these deep continuities with vivid vignettes such as Wilson’s 1919 homage to Mazzini’s statue in Genoa, on his way to the Paris peace conference.

The bitter fruit of Wilson’s efforts was the rejection of the League of Nations by an isolationist US Senate. One of Mazower’s most intriguing insights is that the League, long a byword for fail-

ure, actually proved an effective laboratory for international cooperation, particularly in technical fields. By quietly participating in less politicized areas, Americans laid the foundation for the international order that Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman engineered and that endures today.

Mazower points to Dean Rusk’s unsung role, from his presidency of the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1950s to his tenure as secretary of state in the next decade, as a leading exponent of America’s postwar internationalism.

This was, Mazower says, neither a realist nor an idealist strategy, but a pragmatic, “ambidextrous” blend of the two that saw the virtues of making “instrumental”

use of international institutions, particularly the UN, which could leverage the Americans’ power and confer greater legitimacy on their actions. But as the third world became more assertive in the 1970s and seized the agenda at the UN General Assembly, Washington renounced Rusk’s cooperative strategy and assumed a combative oppositional role advocated by Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

Mazower’s interpretations become less persuasive as his chronicle nears the present. He laments that the Reagan-Thatcher era brought a new trend of “dissolving society in the name of the individual,” oddly conflating the economic repercussions of this development with the rise of a human rights movement that also privileged the individual over the state. In Mazower’s jaundiced view, the humanitarian interventionism of the “Responsibility to Protect” and the International Criminal Court represents nothing more than a new guise for Western imperialism in “those parts of the third world that cannot resist it.”

While it is a pity that he ends on such a sour note, Mazower nonetheless has written a rewarding work of international history. Its ambitious sweep does justice to the variety of thinkers and actors who have contributed to generations of progress, at once arduous and inevitable, toward greater global cooperation. ■

## **Governing the World: The History of an Idea**

by Mark Mazower.

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