

Introduction

Guardians Assemble

On 4 October 1921, William Rappard welcomed the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations to Geneva for its first session. Rappard, a thirty-eight-year-old Swiss professor, had been named Director of the Mandates Section in the League Secretariat a year earlier. He was, that is, the international official appointed to help the new Commission get on with its job, to review the imperial powers' administration of those African, Pacific, and Middle Eastern territories seized from Germany and the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Large, ruddy, curly-haired, and inveterately cheerful, Rappard looked like a Swiss farmer—but he was efficient, capable, and effortlessly trilingual, held degrees in economics and law, and had an expansive network of liberal internationalist friends. He was passionately committed to the League of Nations, established through the signing of the Versailles Treaty more than two years earlier.

That those occupied territories would be governed under League oversight had been one of the Peace Conference's most bitterly contested decisions. Every allied power wanted compensation for war losses and suffering; most thought annexation of their conquests no more than their due. Only reluctantly did they bend to American pressure and the wave of internationalist and anti-imperialist sentiment sweeping the globe, and even so they kept their obligations, and the League's powers, limited and vague. Article 22 of the Covenant loftily decreed that 'advanced nations' would administer 'peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world' according to the principle that 'the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization', but included few practical details. The mandatory powers were to report annually on their administration, and a permanent commission was

established to review them. The Covenant had nothing to say, however, about how long mandatory control was to last, how it might be ended, or indeed what the League was to do if the governing power failed to uphold the principles of the 'sacred trust'.

The mandates system was thus, as Rappard admitted to the Commission in his opening remarks, at best a compromise between partisans of imperial annexation and those who wanted all colonies placed under international control. It was a compromise, moreover, that had very nearly come apart. Once the American Senate rejected the Versailles Treaty and Warren Harding had succeeded Woodrow Wilson as President, imperial statesmen had seen little need to hold to concessions made under very different conditions. Promises to consult Middle Eastern populations on the choice of mandatory power had long been abandoned. Territories had been assigned to their occupiers (or, in the case of France's rule over Syria, to the power willing to force its claims). By 1921, Rappard admitted, that disposition was 'an accomplished fact' and could not be undone.¹ Worse, those ostensible 'mandatories' had proven reluctant to negotiate the terms of their rule and quite uninterested in establishing the oversight apparatus at all. Only fierce criticism of their prevarication and foot-dragging at the first and second annual League assemblies in 1920 and 1921—criticism engineered in part by Rappard himself—had forced the League Council finally to convene the new Commission.

Yet, whether the eight men and one woman whom Rappard welcomed to Geneva in October 1921 could bring the imperial powers to heel was very much an open question. Appointed by the Council but usually on the recommendations of governments, most were retired diplomats or former colonial officials. All but one hailed from states with colonial empires and four from powers ruling territories the Commission was to oversee. All but the Japanese member were white Europeans; only the Scandinavian member was female. And while all were appointed as 'independent experts', ostensibly for their 'personal qualities' and not as representatives of their states, most had close ties to, or were even under direct instructions from, their governments. The Italian member was a former colonial under-secretary greatly offended by Italy's lack of a mandate. The Belgian member had successfully negotiated his country's claim to retain Rwanda and Burundi. The Portuguese member was an unblushing advocate of forced labour for African men. Small wonder the African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois had buttonholed Rappard a few weeks earlier to urge

that a 'man of African descent' be added to the Commission. No such appointment had been, or would ever be, made.²

This should not surprise. By 1921 it was growing clear that, whatever purposes the mandates system had been devised to serve, extending the right of national self-determination was not one of them. Populations placed under mandate responded by resisting its imposition almost as strenuously as had the imperial powers. Arab nationalists thought they had been promised independence and not 'tutelage'; Samoans insisted they were quite as civilized as their New Zealand 'tutors' and well able to 'stand alone'. Just a few months before the Commission assembled, an influential delegation of now-exiled Arab notables had called on Rappard to protest that allied pledges of self-determination had been violated. Having overthrown Faysal bin Husayn's fragile Arab state, France was imposing colonial rule on Syria; Britain was supporting a policy of Jewish immigration in Palestine against the desires of the Arab majority.³ Through contacts with anti-slavery campaigners, Rappard had also heard appeals against French mandatory rule from Duala elites in Cameroon and Ewe traders in Togo. He knew, too, how very little had come of any of those protests. Indeed, under direct orders from his boss, the League's first Secretary General Sir Eric Drummond, he had helped to suppress some of them.

William Emmanuel Rappard, League official and lawyer, was no anti-imperialist. Few Western liberals, in 1921, were. He did not think the occupied areas ready for self-government; the language of civilizational stages, of 'backward' peoples and Western guidance, fell easily from his lips. But Rappard was, nonetheless, an internationalist. He believed international collaboration could assuage national antagonisms; he thought 'native peoples' should be governed in their own interests and not those of the imperial powers. A year in post had cost him some illusions, but it had not dented his beliefs. And, importantly, that year had taught him much. By nature an open-hearted and outspoken man, he had acquired caution, diplomacy, and a measure of guile. He had learned to argue from texts rather than principles, and to wring from the Covenant every possible ounce of authority. He had learned the skills of confidential consultation and careful leaking. He had found allies—in the Secretariat, in the humanitarian and international organizations eager to lend the League a hand, in the American universities and foundations, and above all in the new British member of the Commission, a young idealist named William Ormsby-Gore. And Rappard had one crucial asset, the Mandates Commission—a body that, however cautious its

members, was authorized by the Covenant to advise the Council on ‘all matters’ (and Rappard would always stress that crucial word, ‘all’) relating to the fulfilment of the mandates. The Mandates Commission, Rappard was certain, could be the tool through which the imperial order would be transformed. ‘It was impossible to overestimate the importance’ of their work, Rappard told the startled members. The Commission ‘marked the beginning of an epoch in Colonial history’.⁴

This book argues that Rappard was right. This quixotic and near-forgotten effort to subject imperial rule to international control had profound effects, although they were not quite those that its architects and advocates expected. Mandatory oversight was supposed to make imperial rule more humane and therefore more legitimate; it was to ‘uplift’ backwards populations and—so its more idealistic supporters hoped—even to prepare them for self-rule. It did not do these things: mandated territories were not better governed than colonies across the board and in some cases were governed more oppressively; claims by populations under League oversight for political rights were more often met with repression than conciliation. Historians who have located the system’s significance in its impact on local administration have remained too indebted to the binary frameworks of imperial history, and have left its crucial dynamics and effects unexplored.⁵

To grasp why the League mattered, we must begin elsewhere: in Geneva, with the Mandates Commission, the Secretariat officials who supported it, and the emerging and far-flung network seeking to reach and sway it. For, what was new and transformative about the mandates system was not the rhetoric of the civilizing mission, which all imperial powers employed, nor even ruling practices on the ground, which mirrored those in colonies. What was new, rather, was the apparatus and level of international diplomacy, publicity, and ‘talk’ that the system brought into being. Put bluntly, League oversight could not force the mandatory powers to govern mandated territories differently; instead, it obliged them to *say* they were governing them differently. Imperial statesmen and officials had to face wearying, detailed, and often acrimonious interrogations in Geneva, often with experts briefed by humanitarian lobbies or rival foreign ministries posing questions, and a host of journalists, petitioners, and even nationalist leaders waiting outside the door.

The mandates system, in other words, was a vehicle for what we might call ‘internationalization’—the process by which certain political issues and functions are displaced from the national or imperial, and into the interna-

tional, realm. Not administration but rather the work of legitimation moved to Geneva, as imperial powers strove to defend—and others to challenge—their authority. This level of conflict was unexpected, for the mandatory apparatus had first been conceived, as the Secretariat official Philip Noel-Baker put it, as ‘an organ of constructive co-operation on colonial matters’⁶—as a vehicle, in other words, for collaboration among the imperial powers themselves. But how internationalization works depends on who is in the international room, and the crowd holding entry tickets to Geneva, while certainly largely European and almost entirely white, was nevertheless too large, too polyglot, and—over time—too riven with antagonisms, to be marshalled behind a single banner. Buffeted by claims to national self-determination from outside Europe and demands for revision of the Versailles settlement within it, its deliberations and decisions amplified by critics, scholars, and the press, the mandates system of the League of Nations became the site and stake of a great international argument over imperialism’s claims.

In the history of the mandates system we thus recover the role of the League of Nations as an agent of geopolitical transformation. For decades following its demise in the late 1930s, the League was not remembered in this way. It was the institution that was supposed to end war, and that tragically failed to do so. But in the last decade—no doubt because we too now live in an increasingly networked but also uncertain and multipolar world—historians have been looking back at the League with new eyes. In doing so, we have come to appreciate how complex and consequential this first great experiment in international government really was. The League cannot be treated as if it were a state, possessed of a clear decision-making structure and coercive power. Instead, it is better understood as a force field, one made up of shifting alliances, networks, and institutions, which a host of actors entered and sought to exploit.⁷ Three institutions in particular structured that field.

First was the Assembly: the committee of the whole, the ostensible parliament of the world. Of course, with much of Africa and Asia under European rule, the League Assembly was much smaller and very much whiter than the United Nations is today. Its global reach was limited, for the United States never formally joined (although most Latin American states did), Germany was admitted only in 1926, Turkey in 1932, and the Soviet Union in 1934—by which point the states most determined to overturn the Versailles order were exiting.⁸ And yet, precisely because it was born at a

moment of territorial disarray, the League was always imagined as something more than a meeting ground for sovereign states: it was to rise above national hatreds and defend nothing less than ‘civilization’ itself. In November 1920 and every September thereafter, delegates from the fifty-odd member states, with a train of journalists, lobbyists, and well-wishers, swept into Geneva, turning this placid bourgeois town into the world capital of rhetoric, diplomacy, and style. Potentates and socialites dispensed patronage at competitively lavish receptions; politicians from small states sought to cut a figure and play to audiences at home; and a few famous League personalities—Czechoslovakia’s Eduard Beneš, Belgium’s Paul Hymans, China’s Wellington Koo—exercised influence beyond the ‘throw-weight’ of their states. This world was beautifully and poignantly memorialized by the Hungarian cartoonists Alois Derso and Emery Kelen, and by the great German-Jewish photographer Erich Salomon (later killed at Auschwitz), its triumphs and tragedies—the admission of Germany, Emperor Haile Selassie’s eloquent denunciation of the Italian subjection of Ethiopia—captured by the border-dissolving new medium of film.⁹ Even the British imperialist Leo Amery, who loathed the League and—as we shall see—did his best to weaken it, remembered his Assembly session fondly, recalling the Spanish delegate exclaiming, when a champagne cork went off with a loud pop at one festive lunch, ‘Voilà l’artillerie de la Société des Nations!’¹⁰ That was true: the League’s power lay, not in arms, but in the simple fact that it brought the statesmen of the world, well-oiled by drink, into a public arena where they had to perform civility and espouse internationalism, whatever their private or even political inclinations.¹¹

Behind closed doors and in more rarefied circles, League politics could have a harder edge. A second institution, the League Council, dominated politically if not numerically by the great powers, met regularly (around four times a year) and decided which issues would be addressed—and, more particularly, not addressed. The scramble to secure Council seats among those states that weren’t great powers, but sometimes thought they were, was brutal. Only the Scandinavians amicably traded off; other states doubted their interests were safe in the hands of anyone but themselves. Spain and Brazil both threatened to leave the League if they weren’t given permanent seats when Germany got one on entry in 1926 (and Brazil did so); hypersensitive Poland used various ruses to hang on to a seat for the whole of the League’s life. Sir Eric Drummond, who thought the Council unquestionably the nerve centre of the whole project, wearied himself with these negotiations,

the Council growing larger and losing effectiveness as it grew.¹² The great powers responded by withdrawing for private discussions on the side—the ‘Locarno tea-parties’ much deplored by those excluded but that Drummond shrewdly realized were essential if the powers were to tolerate the League system at all.

But if the Assembly tried to set the agenda and the Council to rein it in, actual responsibility for carrying out policy rested with a third institution, the Secretariat. Drummond had begun building the Secretariat in London, drawing especially on the able men (and, if nearly always in lesser posts, the able women) who had staffed the wartime agencies of allied cooperation. In October 1920 that incipient bureaucracy, complete with baggage and children, boarded a special hired train at Victoria Station and headed for Geneva. The move reinforced its members’ sense of election. A League school and a League radio station were founded; affairs and marriages bloomed; and a distinctive ethos—egalitarian, cosmopolitan, sexually emancipated—ruled. Of course, ‘spying’ would become a major problem too, with ostensibly impartial officials reporting back to their foreign ministries, but by the early 1920s Drummond had created something entirely new: a truly international bureaucracy, structured by function and not by nationality, loyal to an international charter, and capable of efficiently managing a complex programme. This is the structure of the United Nations to this day.¹³

These three institutions were crucial, but when commentators began referring to a ‘Geneva spirit’—‘l’esprit de Genève’—they meant something more. For the impact of the League was sustained and magnified by the host of international commissions, organizations, lobbies, and experts who were incorporated into aspects of its work or simply volunteered their services. Limited in size and resources (the Secretariat counted only about seven hundred individuals at its height), the League drew on the expertise of, and sometimes simply devolved authority onto, a host of swiftly internationalizing civic and voluntary organizations. Clever officials like Ludwig Rajchman at the Health Section or Rachel Crowdy at the Social Section exploited their close ties to American foundations or international philanthropies to supplement modest budgets and staff. As such projects proliferated and voluntary organizations moved offices to Geneva, nations-who-would-be-states, experts seeking jobs, scholars seeking subjects, and lobbies seeking recognition all clamoured to make their voices heard.¹⁴ The Secretary General presided over that cacophony but did not control it. No one did: that was the whole point.

The peacemakers of 1919, watching the rise of that noisy, polyvalent world, felt a sense of ambivalence and sometimes trepidation. They had thought of the League as a tool for great-power collaboration, but with the Americans and the Soviets outside, the Germans excluded at French insistence, and too many voluble third-rank politicians, pacifists, and ‘cranks’ massed on the Geneva stage, they doubted it could ever play that role. The League was ‘more likely to become a centre of intrigue than a real benefit to the peace of the world’, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George complained in December 1920,¹⁵ his Cabinet Secretary Sir Maurice Hankey—the man first offered Drummond’s job, but who had rejected it as less important than the work of coordinating British imperial policy—deplored ‘the dangerous tendency of the League Secretariat to arrogate to itself too much power’.¹⁶ The two floated schemes to replace the League with a new organization centred on the great powers and sought to bypass the League through the ‘diplomacy by conference’ of those years—the Washington Conference, the Genoa Conference, and so forth.

Yet the League could not be sidelined. Partly this was because it had the only competent international staff around, so much so that Drummond, in 1922, was belatedly asked to dispatch his teams of translators and typists and précis-writers to Genoa to manage the conference that had tried to exclude them.¹⁷ Partly the League was sustained by the hopes of the millions who joined the national League of Nations societies founded to support it, who signed petitions or protested when their governments violated its norms, who studied the Covenant text or went to lectures about its work, who reverently toured its headquarters in Geneva.¹⁸ But the League also survived because it addressed—indeed, was forced by its member states and constrained by the Covenant to address—issues that no government would or could take on alone.

William Rappard, who knew the institution so well, captured the scope of its activities in a 1925 book aptly titled *International Relations as Viewed from Geneva*. In terms of its mission, Rappard explained, there were really three separate Leagues of Nations.¹⁹ The first he called the ‘League to Outlaw War’. This was the League whose provisions absorbed governments and international lawyers as they sought to give teeth to the Covenant; that brought statesmen and officials together to discuss disarmament; and that intervened with more or less success in territorial conflicts—between Sweden and Finland, Greece and Bulgaria, Columbia and Peru, and a host of others—before succumbing to the triple blows of the Manchuria Crisis,

the Second Disarmament Conference, and the Italo-Ethiopian War. It is this League on which such hopes were pinned, that was disparaged after 1945, and that people today still have in mind when they say that the League ‘failed’.²⁰

Alongside this beset world of security conferences and international crises, however, there were two other Leagues of Nations. There was a ‘technical’ League working to combat the proliferating hazards and traffics of an increasingly interconnected world. This League set standards for air traffic, radio transmission, and child welfare; organized the Austrian bailout and standardized economic data; combated sexual and drug trafficking; dealt with Russian refugees and negotiated the Greek-Turkish population exchange; pioneered development missions to China and Liberia; set up research stations to track epidemic diseases; and ran institutes and conferences to promote economic and intellectual cooperation. This League never ‘declined’ and only expanded, steadily promoting the authority and elevating the role of those new international actors, the ‘expert’ and what we would today call the NGO. The political scientist David Mitrany, who had close ties to League officials, had these operations in mind when, during the Second World War, he crafted his ‘functionalist’ theory of how cooperation on mundane activities might create networks that would promote peace.²¹ It is this League that laid the foundation for the institutions of global governance we have today, and that is now the focus of so much historical interest.²²

And, finally, there was a third League, what one might call the ‘world-orderers’ League, which worked to adjudicate relations of sovereignty. Rappard, conscious of how many territorial decisions had been made in 1919—and how difficult those were proving to enforce—called this third, inelegantly, ‘the League to execute the Peace Treaties’. That League ran plebiscites in or attempted to adjudicate certain disputed areas (Memel, Silesia, Vilna, Mosul, Alexandretta) and administered others (Danzig, the Saarland). It also ran two enormously consequential regimes set up to stabilize and legitimate the decisions reached in Paris and Lausanne. One of these was the minorities regime, a system through which the League Council, guided by Secretariat officials, sought to hold a dozen new or reconstituted East European or Balkan states to promises of minority rights they had made as the price of sovereignty;²³ the second was the mandates system. This League, like the others, changed over time, especially in response to Germany’s 1926 entry and then exit only seven years later. It became, in the eyes of some, the

League to *overcome* the peace treaties, with not only Germany but also other states and internationalists trying to use those regimes to challenge and change that settlement. By the mid-1930s the minorities regime had crumbled under that revisionist onslaught, but the mandates system continued, re-emerging in 1945 as the United Nations Trusteeship System.

This book is the first comprehensive history of the mandates system—that is, of the League’s effort to manage the imperial order—written in over fifty years.²⁴ It treats the system as a whole, attending to all seven mandatory powers and all of the fourteen mandated territories scattered through Africa, the Pacific, and the Middle East. It also examines how strategies and struggles over the mandated territories emerged and were played out in three different realms—those of imperial and great-power interests and diplomacy, of the League’s officials and norms, and of the balance of forces within the territory itself. These arenas were not, of course, distinct. They were fluid, cross-cutting, and bumped up against one another all the time. Indeed, it is precisely by studying those interactions that our story emerges.

It is a story that will take us to many parts of the world—the windswept scrublands north of South Africa’s Orange River, famine-blighted hilltops in Rwanda, Baghdad’s public garden at the moment of independence, Syria’s Jabal Druze under siege. We will accompany the Samoan trader Olaf Nelson as he gathered signatures against New Zealand’s rule, the African American scholar Ralph Bunche as he headed to Togo to pursue his dissertation research, and the prospector Mick Leahy as he marched into the New Guinea highlands, leaving death and wonder in his wake. But always, those travels will bring us back to Geneva. For Geneva was where quarrels over the mandated territories ended up: it was where Nelson sent his petitions, where Bunche began his research, where Leahy found himself denounced as a murderer. League bodies adjudicated those arguments through internationally mandated public procedures and flexible private diplomacy, through rigorous textual analysis and personal lobbying and pressure. Officials worked hard at times to keep matters quiet, but without much success, for not only was the League founded on the principle of public openness, its institutions were too large and too riven by national and ideological rivalries and loyalties to keep secrets well. National officials shared information with Secretariat officials (and vice versa); disaffected inhabitants sent exposés to humanitarian organizations and political allies. And much made its way into the columns of a vigilant press.

All mandatory powers and all mandated territories were affected by this process of internationalization. They were not, however, all equally affected,

nor did League bodies or indeed the Western newspaper-reading public pay all equal mind. This is not, then—it cannot be—a history of political developments in each mandated territory. Such accounts must inevitably be local; they cannot privilege events that reverberated internationally over others critical to developments within the territory itself. A history of international change must do that, however. It must examine those moments when argument and conflict spilled beyond the individual state or empire, landed in the League force field, and went on to affect what we might call the global order as a whole. This book therefore tracks those events and controversies—revolts and famines, certainly, but also debates over ‘trusteeship’, ‘civilization’, ‘independence’, and ‘sovereignty’—that reverberated through Geneva and forced an international response. Territories that were lightning rods for controversy (pre-eminently South West Africa and Palestine, though also at particular points Syria, New Guinea, French-mandated Cameroon, Western Samoa, Tanganyika, Rwanda, and Iraq) thus receive sustained attention; those that drew little international scrutiny (the Japanese Islands, British-mandated Cameroon, British- and French-mandated Togo, and Nauru) are only fitfully visible. The eyes of Geneva turned to follow catastrophes and crises; its ears bent to hear particularly strident or eloquent voices. Our eyes and ears will follow them.

Before we begin that tour, however, we must understand how the mandates system emerged and worked. Part One provides that account, looking in three chapters at the roles played by imperial contestation, bureaucratic innovation, and pressure from below in shaping the character of the mandates system. Intended by its Anglo-American founders to serve as a vehicle for inter-imperial collaboration, one that would be in the hands of government officials and that would generalize Anglo-American norms, it was rescued and reshaped—once those founders lost interest—by a group of (largely British) internationalists, humanitarians, and League officials one level down. The system that emerged was much less statist and much more genuinely international than anticipated. It was more dependent on the Secretariat, and that Secretariat was more independent than expected as well. Finally, the system was more open to pressure from various groups claiming to speak either for inhabitants or for ‘public opinion’—such pressure flowing to Geneva through a surprisingly open petition process.

The book then traces how League oversight affected the imperial order from the First World War until the Second. As we shall see, geopolitical conditions and tensions, especially what one might call a first ‘Cold War’

between the powers that made and those that challenged the Versailles settlement, set the bounds within which the League system worked. Indeed, in the period from 1922 until the late 1920s, treated in Part Two, the mandates system served largely to mitigate Anglo-French antagonisms, to promulgate a paternalistic definition of 'trusteeship', and to push claims to 'self-determination' off the table. Chapters on the League's handling of risings and civil disobedience movements in South West Africa, Syria, and Western Samoa lay out this retreat in detail.

Yet the mandates system did not remain in this Anglo-French cul-de-sac, for German entry into the League in 1926 unleashed a new dynamic. One might say that the Germans seized the role the Americans had abdicated, for as the major European power without an empire—and, moreover, as the former sovereign of many of the mandated territories—Germany was determined that if she could not regain her colonies, she could at least fight to realize those 1919 promises of international control, open economic access, and a roadmap towards independence. The chapters in Part Three track the fierce debates within and outside the League over sovereignty, free labour, and possible moves to independence, a story that culminates in Britain's prescient decision to move Iraq from mandate status to a clientelist form of statehood.

That move could perhaps have been a harbinger of future developments, but the economic crisis, German withdrawal in 1933, and the subsequent erosion of the League's authority placed this attempt to develop international norms about empire under considerable strain. As the chapters in Part Four show, after 1935 that project fell into crisis on every level. Italy's attack on Ethiopia that year undermined Western claims to civilizational superiority even within the West, while allied willingness to contemplate colonial concessions to Germany—that is, to contemplate returning one or more territories inhabited by non-whites to a Nazi state—further eroded the legitimacy of the mandates system. When the Commission grew sharply critical of British policy in Palestine, even Britain—hitherto the League's main protector—lost faith in the project of imperial 'internationalization'. By 1939 the mandates system had very few defenders.

It had had, however, profound effects. If international oversight—as opposed to alien rule more generally—left only light traces on some territories, in others those dynamics of scrutiny and publicity had a real impact. Britain's inability in Palestine to back away from a Zionist pledge that most of its High Commissioners came to think misguided, Belgium's decision to

entrench ethnic divisions as a tool of labour control in Rwanda and Burundi, and South Africa's inability to annex lightly populated South West Africa: all these attest to the way a Geneva-based culture of international lobbying and debate created new risks for imperial states and at times changed what they wanted. Those local effects were variable and do not conform to any single pattern. Yet, in the system as a whole we find a logic and a teleology.

The mandates system made imperial governance more burdensome and brought normative statehood nearer. This was not what its architects and officials had intended. To the contrary, they sought at every turn to uphold imperial authority and strengthen the prestige and legitimacy of alien, non-consensual rule. The problem was that the internationalization inherent in League oversight worked against those purposes. By offering a platform for wordy humanitarians, belligerent German revisionists, and nationalists determined to expose the brutalities of imperial rule, the mandates system not only undermined imperial authority but also—possibly more importantly—led at least some within the European empires to question whether direct rule was so desirable anyway. That most local inhabitants had no affection for the mandates system seems apparent. Over time, however, many within the imperial powers lost their sympathy for it as well. After all, since the Mandates Commission readily upheld other forms of imperial incursion, failing to prevent massive alienation of native land and insisting that the mandated territories be opened to international concessions and trade, was formal administrative control really necessary? Small wonder that Britain—the most 'global' of the imperial powers—chose to craft in Iraq a form of independence that seemed far less troublesome.

After 1945 the movement towards normative statehood would accelerate. In 1920 there were some fifty independent states; today there are two hundred. Colonies and protectorates, condominiums and trust territories, those trailing appendages of empire, have vanished from the globe. Yet if statehood is now ubiquitous, its makeup is varied indeed. Some states set their own rules, but others lack not only that 'monopoly over the legitimate use of force' which the great German sociologist Max Weber considered the foundation of statehood but also the capacity to provide their citizens with basic services and rights. Their leaders retort that they are as subjected by global corporations and international lending bodies as they once were by imperial states. We live in a world of formally independent states of very varying capacity, and if we look back to the mandates system, we can see this order emerging.

PART

I

Making the Mandates
System

ONE

Of Covenants and Carve-Ups

I am very doubtful myself about the success of the League of Nations, but I have no doubt whatever that, if it is to be an effective instrument at all, it can only be so *by virtue of the influence of the British Empire and America* . . . We must try to extend the *pax Britannica* into a *pax mundi*.

Lord Milner, 14 August 1919¹

[Henry] Simon frankly said that he saw no real difference between a colony and such mandated area. This is the French view. As Peretti said to me later in Paris: 'You will see what these mandates will develop into in ten years.'

Diary of George Louis Beer, entry for 10 August 1919²

When elephants fight, the grass suffers.

East African proverb³

On the USS *George Washington* in the icy mid-Atlantic in December 1918, George Louis Beer felt the weight of the world on his shoulders. Beer, a forty-six-year-old former businessman and lecturer in British history at Columbia University, was part of the 100-man delegation accompanying Woodrow Wilson on his mission to bring Europe a just and lasting peace. Beer had been the colonial policy expert on 'The Inquiry', that wartime cabal of American academics assembled to plan the settlement; his particular responsibility was to secure the 'free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims' promised in the fifth of Wilson's Fourteen Points. Annexation of the conquered German and Ottoman territories had been ruled out of the question, and through 1918 proposals had emerged to place 'backwards' or 'derelict' peoples under international control. But it was still far from clear what that international system might look like.

A methodical and serious-minded man, and with little to do on board ship but eat large meals and take the odd constitutional on deck, Beer hoped to use the voyage to hammer out a plan. But he found the atmosphere on board—he recorded in his diary—‘highly undemocratic and unsociable’: Wilson kept to his stateroom; it was almost impossible for anyone to get to him. And when Beer finally managed to sit him down for a serious talk, he found his chief’s ideas vague at best. The German colonies were to be the ‘common property’ of that dream project, a League of Nations, with actual administration entrusted to some small non-imperial state. Wilson thought the Scandinavians might do a good job.⁴

Beer’s own ideas weren’t well developed, but he was fairly certain this wouldn’t work. He agreed with Wilson on the fundamentals. Like Wilson, he thought the occupied territories could not be returned, for ‘nothing could be more ignoble than . . . to turn over millions of helpless natives to the tender mercies of Germany’.⁵ Like Wilson too, he never considered the prospect of Africans governing themselves. ‘The negro race,’ Beer had opined in one memorandum for The Inquiry, ‘has hitherto shown no capacity for progressive development except under the tutelage of other peoples’.⁶ He too thought the work of ‘tutelage’ had to be internationalized, distinguished from imperial rule, and carried out under open public scrutiny and according to humane and progressive norms.

But Beer hardly thought the small nations of Europe well equipped to carry forward such a plan. What could the Norwegians possibly know about governing colonies? It wasn’t just their lack of experience that troubled him. Beer took nineteenth-century ideas about the relative value of different European peoples and civilizations very seriously indeed. At the Peace Conference he would be horrified to see ‘Germans, Magyars, and Italians . . . being sacrificed to people whose cultural value was infinitely less’; he thought it ‘far preferable to have Poles under Germans and Jugo-Slavs under Italians than the contrary’.⁷ And when it came to governing colonies, Beer was persuaded that one nation provided the model for the world to follow. ‘Native rights were most carefully and effectively protected’ in the British colonies, and Britain was also the power most committed to those free trading economic policies that the United States thought crucial to future peace.⁸ Why not use the League to generalize the British Empire’s excellent practices?

Unsurprisingly, British politicians, internationalists, and humanitarians saw it mostly that way as well. By the time Wilson sailed, the British were, metaphorically speaking, in the mid-Atlantic, ready to greet him. The continental

settlement reached at Versailles, heavily shaped by French interests and anxieties, would seek above all to contain Germany; the colonial settlement, however, was an Anglo-American product. It looked the way it did because the British were so desperate for an American alliance, but also because American preferences and ideals could be reconciled most easily with British imperial practices. But if the affinity between American and British interests structured the mandates system from the start, it also left the system more vulnerable when the Americans pulled out. By late 1919 the French were openly seeking to subvert an international regime that they perceived—rightly—to be structured against them. The mandates regime that was born at the Peace Conference was nearly dead by 1920, making our first story one of an infanticide barely averted. That system would survive, but it would change, sustained not by American idealism or imperial collusion but rather, much more precariously, by the authority of the League itself.

The great wartime scramble

No one thought the territories that changed hands in the early years of the First World War would become the harbingers of a new order. They were just booty. For two centuries European empires had adjusted their holdings and borders through global war, sugar islands and princely states changing hands with a shifting balance of power. Why should this war be any different?

While the German armies fought their way through Belgium and dug in in Flanders and northern France, allied and Dominion armies moved to occupy Germany's colonial possessions. Germany's undefended Samoan islands were surrendered to a landing party of New Zealand troops on 29 August 1914. The phosphate island of Nauru was turned over to the HMAS *Melbourne* on 9 September, and some three weeks later, after a short fight, the capital of Germany's holdings in New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago fell to an Australian naval force. The Australians then pressed forward towards the equator, only to discover that the Japanese had already sent warships to capture the Caroline, Mariana, and Marshall Islands. By mid-October, all Germany's Pacific possessions were in allied hands.⁹

Ousting Germany from Africa took longer. British and French troops swiftly occupied Togoland and the Cameroonian port of Duala, but the well-equipped German forces in the interior resisted. Not until early 1916

would they pass into Spanish territory. The South West African campaign ran into trouble too, for some troops mutinied rather than take up arms against fellow whites; only in spring 1915 was a new invasion mounted and Windhoek taken. The campaign for German East Africa proved most troublesome of all. For four years the clever German General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and his capable African askaris tied up British and South African forces in a guerrilla campaign waged throughout East Africa. That campaign, and the opportunistic seizure of Rwanda and Burundi by a rapacious Belgian force, left famine and devastation in its wake.¹⁰

None of those conquerors thought they would leave anytime soon. South Africa extended its rail line north and began handing out land to white settlers; Australia doubled the number of New Guinean indentured labourers on seized copra plantations. By 1916, when the British government first appointed an interdepartmental committee to think through policy towards the captured territories, annexationist sentiment was strong. Although the representative from the General Staff warned that the balance of power required a 'strong Teutonic state' in Central Europe, and that Germany would become resentful and hard to manage if not accorded a colonial sphere, his objections were swiftly quashed. Whether to amplify imperial holdings (as with German East Africa), to provide booty and buffers for the Dominions (as with the Pacific territories and South West Africa), or simply as bribes for importunate allies (the plan for Togo and Cameroon), the German colonies should all be retained—a decision confirmed by a War Cabinet Committee on 'Territorial Desiderata' in the spring of 1917.¹¹

'What we have we hold': a time-honoured imperial policy that won French and Belgian support as well. Since the French Cabinet and public were transfixed by the carnage on the Western Front, the articulation of colonial aims was left to officials and lobbyists, whose ambitions now grew unchecked. That the German colonies would not be restored went without saying, but when Emmanuel de Peretti and Albert Duchêne, respectively heads of the African departments at the French Foreign and Colonial Ministries, invited Belgian colonial officials Octave Louwers and Pierre Orts to Paris in September 1917 for a private conversation, those assembled swiftly found points of agreement. One was that it was imperative to sweep away the Berlin and Brussels Acts that had established free trade and common norms in the Congo basin, so that European powers might hold their African territories in full sovereignty. Another was that Britain, with its irritating penchant for international agreements and free

trade, was likely to be the main impediment. Remember Duchêne and Orts: we shall meet them again wearing new and ill-fitting 'League of Nations' hats.¹²

But the German colonies were not the only prize. The allies were also dismembering and squabbling over the Ottoman Empire. The secret Treaty of London of April 1915 brought Italy into the war with a promise of parts of Southern Anatolia as well as 'equitable compensation' in Africa while leaving the Middle Eastern provinces to Britain and France.¹³ All powers, however, found it hard to make good on these plans. Britain's Indian Army had attacked Mesopotamia early in the war, only to find itself mired in a draining campaign that would last four years and cost over 90,000 (mostly Indian) casualties.¹⁴ New surrogates were needed, and in 1915 one was found in Sharif Husayn, ruler of the Hejaz, restive under Ottoman overlordship and willing to lend Britain aid in exchange for recognition of his own sovereign claims. Notes between Husayn and the High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, cemented the alliance (and unleashed a century of recriminations), an 'Arab Bureau' of intelligence officers in Cairo



Figure 1.1 Faysal bin Husayn, King of Syria (1920) and of Iraq (1921–33).

coordinated strategy and paid the subsidies, and Husayn's able and magnetic third son Faysal (Figure 1.1) occupied himself with the dangerous work of cultivating Syrian nationalists in famine-ridden and Ottoman-controlled Damascus. The Arab Revolt began in June 1916 with attacks on Ottoman garrisons and supply lines in and around Mecca, Medina, and Ta'if.¹⁵ Remember Faysal: his gamble on British support would win him a crown and a country, but not the one he or his followers had wanted.

In France, Robert de Caix, the aristocratic, Catholic secretary of the powerful and well-connected *Comité de l'Asie française*, noted that Anglo-Arab alliance with trepidation. France had powerful interests in the Levant. By 1914, France had guaranteed the autonomy of the Christian community of Mount Lebanon for half a century, French companies handled much of the silk trade, French had become a lingua franca for the educated class, and there were 40,000 children enrolled in French schools.¹⁶ Now, de Caix's imperial lobby hoped to bring the whole of Syria—and, if possible, Palestine too—under France's wing. But France had no troops to spare for Middle Eastern adventures and had to use diplomacy to stake its claims. While McMahon parlayed with Husayn, the French diplomat and colonialist François Georges-Picot negotiated with the British Middle East expert Sir Mark Sykes. The controversial agreement that bore their name, finalized in May 1916 but not made public until a year later, stipulated that France would establish 'such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire' in Lebanon and a swathe of territory running from Cilicia to Armenia, that Britain would have similar freedom in Mesopotamia, and that much of coastal Palestine would be placed under international control. True, the agreement conceded that the two powers would uphold 'an independent Arab State or a Confederation of Arab States' in the interior, but divided that region into two 'zones' within which France in the north and Britain in the south would have exclusive rights.¹⁷

In 1916 most British and virtually all French officials thought these promises of Arab statehood would never come due. It was a moment of sweeping but ambiguous pledges. The following November saw the most famous of them, issued in the peculiar form of a letter from British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to the English Zionist, Baron Rothschild. 'His Majesty's Government,' so it read, 'view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political

status enjoyed by Jews in any other country’—sixty-eight words that have yielded a century of controversy.¹⁸ In the spring of 1918, just months after British imperial forces under General Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem, a Zionist Commission arrived in Palestine to begin planning the new ‘home-land’. It was led by Chaim Weizmann, the brilliant Zionist politician and research chemist—Russian Jew by birth, British by affiliation—who had emerged as the movement’s most adept leader. Remember Weizmann: he too would gamble on British support and win a state, and it would be the one he wanted.

So it was that by the autumn of 1918, when German and Ottoman resistance collapsed and Germany asked for an armistice, all the German colonies and the Ottoman Arab provinces were under allied occupation. They were a disparate collection of lands: save for the accident of having changed hands in a war fought for European interests, they had nothing in common. Tiny Nauru was a few kilometres wide, South West Africa larger than France. Rwanda and Burundi were densely populated, but the enormous expanse that became Tanganyika contained only some four million people, mandate Palestine fewer than a million, arid South West Africa a few hundred thousand. They were unlike in climate, resources, economic development, social structure, and indeed their prior experience of colonial rule, for whereas the Middle East territories had at least had Ottoman institutions and Arab culture in common, Germany had not governed its overseas territories according to a single plan. South West Africa’s indigenous population had been brutally subjugated to make way for white settlement, but the sophisticated and rank-conscious Samoans had been treated cautiously, and most New Guineans probably never knew they were under German rule. And yet, in the interwar years, these disparate and far-flung territories would have one experience in common. They would be governed under the oversight of the League of Nations.

The Emergence of the Mandates Plan

To explain how that wartime scramble gave way, within a year, to a plan to entrust ‘civilized’ peoples with the benevolent ‘tutelage’ of the rest, we have to look beyond imperial statesmen and their machinations. There is a reason for this. Faced with the Bolshevik challenge and an American public unwilling to fight a war for imperial aims, a vain and bookish American President promised a peace of a new kind, a peace without annexations or

indemnities, overseen by a new global body, the League of Nations. That ‘Wilsonian moment’, as we know, elicited a response that Wilson never imagined, with mobilized publics from Korea to Poland to Samoa—not to mention the populations already taking matters into their own hands in the Middle East—deciding that the President’s stirring words applied to them.¹⁹

To fight the tiger or to ride it? It is enormously consequential that the British government decided, not for the last time, that they had no alternative but to be on the Americans’ side. Indeed, not only were British officials and intellectuals already fully engaged in a transatlantic dialogue about the creation of a League of Nations, but when it came to the particular question of how to reform imperial practice, the British were out ahead.²⁰ This was the case partly because British politicians were constrained by the same liberal political culture that both hampered and empowered Wilson. Unlike France and Belgium, Britain too had entered the First World War without being directly attacked, justifying that engagement as a defence of the rights of small states and the principles of international law. Parliamentary oversight and pressures for greater democratic control of foreign policy were strong and openly annexationist sentiments widely deplored. True, the African conquests were welcomed even by liberals, but only as a means of saving natives from the depredations of the Hun. As early as 1916 the Anti-Slavery Society, the most vocal and well placed of humanitarian lobbies, thus raised the question of how ‘the child races of the world’ were to be protected at the war’s end; and if the Society found it ‘absurd’ to imagine that ‘Mandingos, Hereros, Polynesians, Fiots, Fans, and Kikuyus’ might sit beside ‘Russian, French and German diplomats’ to decide their fate,²¹ one year later it had changed its mind. In 1917 and early 1918 the Society, the Labour Party, and an influential slice of liberal opinion all came to agree that Africans should be consulted directly about their wishes and a system of ‘international control’ established to safeguard their rights.²²

Most thought these principles entirely compatible with British imperial rule. Ideas of imperial tutelage or ‘trusteeship’ had a long genealogy, with the history of British anti-slavery cited as evidence of the empire’s role in generalizing humanitarian norms.²³ Secure in its assumptions of moral leadership, British politicians were comfortable stating that, as Lloyd George promised in June of 1917, ‘the wishes, the desires, and the interests’ of the people of the former German colonies ‘must be the dominant factor in settling their future government’.²⁴ Six months later, on 5 January 1918, in a speech given three days *before* Wilson’s ‘Fourteen Points’ address, the Prime

Minister confirmed not only that the peoples of the Middle East deserved to have their 'separate national conditions' recognized, but also that native 'chiefs and councils' of the former German colonies were 'competent to consult and speak for their tribes and members'.²⁵ Such consultation was, after all, expected to show only a strong preference for British rule. The main problem the British would face, one Foreign Office official remarked smugly, was that 'we cannot hope to take into the British sphere all the peoples in the world who would doubtless like to enter it'.²⁶

Which leads us to another reason why Britain found Wilsonian ideas easy to accommodate: because they dovetailed so nicely with British imperial practice. British statesmen had always hunted diligently for 'native rulers' with whom they could ally and trade; a preference for 'indirect rule' marked the imperium at many turns. Various princes and potentates should indeed run their own affairs, guided by British residents or consuls and with the Royal Navy keeping the global peace: this was much the best (and cheapest) approach. But what imperial statesmen tended to mean by that was—as Colonial Secretary Lord Milner (here speaking of Arabia) patiently explained to Lloyd George in 1919—that the native state 'should be kept out of the sphere of European political intrigue and within the British sphere of influence: in other words, that her independent native rulers should have no foreign treaties except with us'.²⁷ Indeed, the Arab Bureau had been set up to extend British hegemony along such lines.

But in the process something unexpected happened. Some of those British officials began to take Wilsonian language to heart. Consider William Ormsby-Gore, a young Conservative army officer from an aristocratic family seconded to the Arab Bureau in 1916. Ormsby-Gore had found Egyptian politics discouraging—'we rule here by fear & not by love or gratitude or loyalty'²⁸—but his work building the alliance with Husayn convinced him that a new approach was possible. The Sykes-Picot agreement profoundly shocked him. 'We make professions of defending and helping small & oppressed nations,' he protested to one of his superiors. If then 'we parcel out between our allies & ourselves vast tracts of countries which do not want us . . . we shall have to admit that the Ramsay Macdonalds, Trevelyan & Shaws at home, and our doubting Indian critics in India, knew us better than we knew ourselves'.²⁹ Britain should win friends by embracing self-determination, and should do so, he thought (warmheartedly if not entirely logically), for both Arabs and Jews. Recalled to London in 1917, Ormsby-Gore became part of the circle that crafted the Balfour Declaration

and in spring 1918 was sent to Palestine with Chaim Weizmann and the Zionist Commission (Figure 1.2) to try to 'get the Arab & Jewish leaders to come to some agreement regarding their respective rights and powers in future'.³⁰ Remember Ormsby-Gore: we will soon meet him again, looking to Geneva to carry forward those projects.

Of course, the British embrace of self-determination was often more cynical than that. The Sykes-Picot agreement had been struck when the Ottomans were still in control, but by the end of 1918 virtually the whole of the Middle East was in British hands. Success bred greater ambitions, as a host of policymakers began to think that the French might be pushed aside and the British Empire hold sway over a corridor of colonies and 'native states' running from India to the Cape. When Allenby held back his troops that December and let Faysal enter Damascus on a white horse before him, as when British officials read out the Anglo-French Declaration promising to establish 'National Governments and administrations deriving their authority from the initiative and free choice of the indigenous popu-



Figure 1.2 Chaim Weizmann, in white suit, and the Zionist Commission to Palestine, Spring 1918. First two officers on the left: Edwin Samuel (son of Herbert Samuel) and William Ormsby-Gore.

lations', they were making a bid for their own hegemony as well. As Lord Curzon, then Lord President of Council, pithily put it in one Cabinet committee meeting, the British were going to 'play self-determination for all it is worth' to secure their imperial gains.³¹

Out of this potent brew of liberal internationalism, imperial humanitarianism, and sheer territorial acquisitiveness the British proposals for the mandates system emerged.³² There was still no consensus. South African Prime Minister Jan Christiaan Smuts made one influential case for the British Empire as a model for the League in his December 1918 pamphlet, *The League of Nations: A Practical Suggestion*. But Smuts' florid production was in fact an effort at containment, for he restricted international control to the Middle East alone, since the German colonies were all 'inhabited by barbarians, who not only cannot possibly govern themselves, but to whom it would be impracticable to apply any ideal of political self-determination'.³³ The Anti-Slavery Society thought otherwise, and even some within the Colonial Office were prepared to accept that the League should have the right to visit territories, terminate mandates, and adjudicate disputes between states. Indeed, if the League thought such stipulations should extend to all colonies, one official noted that 'Britain at any rate would have no objections to raise.'³⁴

But the French would. Through December of 1918 French officials watched the emerging Anglo-American alliance with mounting rage. To their mind, France had won its right to territorial compensation at Verdun, and Britain's attempt to change the rules of the game amounted to treason. France needed West Africa to provide soldiers in any future war, and at the Quai d'Orsay (the Foreign Ministry) Robert de Caix thought Faysal's new Syrian state little more than a British surrogate.³⁵ But when French diplomats tried to get their British counterparts to come to a bilateral agreement before the Americans arrived, they found their erstwhile allies evasive and difficult. The British, having cast in their lot with Wilson, would use that alliance to force acceptance of a mandates system no one else wanted.

The waxing and waning of Wilsonianism

In January 1919 the various national delegations settled into the grand Parisian hotels and got to work. George Louis Beer thought they operated

very differently. The British were well prepared, and Beer found the atmosphere at the Hotel Majestic refreshingly 'democratic', with 'all the big political personages from all corners of the Empire' eating together in the dining room.³⁶ The French were poorly prepared but it hardly mattered, for Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau paid no attention to his ministers and ignored their advice.³⁷ Beer's own American delegation was most paradoxical. Wilson had arrived with dozens of experts and reams of reports and plans, but once in place he ignored them. A story was going round, Beer recorded in frustration in March, that when the American experts had good ideas they took them to the French, who passed them to the British, who finally brought them to Wilson.³⁸

That the British would mediate between the moralizing Americans and the rest became clear as soon as the colonial settlement came up. The United States, France, Britain, Italy, and Japan readily agreed on 24 January that the German colonies would not be given back, but Wilson's proposal to administer them under League mandate won support only from Lloyd George, and even he suggested that the Pacific and South African territories be exempted. The Dominions and the Japanese ministers vociferously agreed, and the French Colonial Minister Henry Simon stated on 27 January that while France was willing to apply the 'open door' and to protect the native population, she claimed a 'right to sovereignty' in order to carry out 'her work of civilization'. The Peace Conference had been in session for ten days, and already anti-annexationism was in tatters. 'The world would say that the Great Powers first portioned out the helpless parts of the earth, and then formed a League of Nations,' Wilson interjected angrily. No one would have confidence in a League constructed on that basis.³⁹

Lloyd George scrambled for compromise. He thought the mandates system worth saving, not only in order to keep Wilson on board, but—as he told the British Empire Delegation—for sound imperial reasons as well. Lord Robert Cecil, the maverick Conservative and internationalist who became Wilson's main British partner in the project to frame the League of Nations, agreed: the proposed standards prevailed in the British Empire anyway but would force reform on 'the badly-governed colonies of France and Portugal'. On 27 January, Smuts had insisted on the need to limit the mandates system to the Middle East territories where people could 'speak for themselves', but Lloyd George now thought the system could—if there were different levels of mandate—be extended.⁴⁰ Australia's fiery Welsh Prime Minister Billy Hughes still carped and caviled, but

by leaning on Wilson and the Dominion premiers alike, Lloyd George won agreement.

On 30 January 1919 the Supreme Council agreed that the Ottoman Middle East and the former German colonies, being inhabited by 'peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world', would be administered by 'advanced nations' on the principle 'that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization'. Three levels of mandate were defined. 'A' mandates would be drafted for the communities formerly under Ottoman rule, who had 'reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized', and who were therefore to be rendered 'advice and assistance' by a mandatory selected in consideration of their own wishes. 'B' mandates would be applied to Germany's ex-colonies in East, West, and Central Africa, which would be governed under various humanitarian principles and would grant equal economic access to all League states. Finally, a set of territories that 'owing to the sparseness of their populations, or their small size, or their remoteness from the centres of civilisation, or their geographical contiguity to the mandatory state'—the Peacemakers had the Pacific territories and South West Africa in mind—could be administered as under 'C' mandates as 'integral portions' of the mandatory power's own territory. The French were still unhappy with the planned proscription on militarization, but when Lloyd George breezily assured Clemenceau that provided they did not 'train big nigger armies for the purposes of aggression' they could recruit at will, France too accepted the mandates system in principle.⁴¹

The decisions reached on 30 January would hold. There would be a mandates system, with three levels of 'mandate' and with the obligations of the administering power and the rights of the subject populations varying by level. The language and structure agreed that day would become Article 22 of the League Covenant. But much was still unclear—including which nations would act as 'mandatories', which national communities in the Middle East would come into the system (the situation of the Armenians, Kurds, and indeed of Anatolia itself being still in limbo), and the precise conditions under which mandatories would rule. In theory, the Supreme Council of the allied powers was to decide those questions, and certainly it heard much testimony about them. The 'Big Four'—and then, when Italy walked out, the 'Big Three'—listened to Belgium's appeal to retain Rwanda and Burundi, to the Italians' exigent demands, and to Chaim Weizmann's

case for Zionist rights in Palestine. They heard Emir Faysal's appeal for international recognition of his fragile government in Damascus, American academics' warning of the utter opposition by Syrians to French rule, the Maronite patriarch's case for a 'greater Lebanon' under French protection, and the flowery perorations of a francophile Syrian delegation organized by the Quai d'Orsay. On 20 March they agreed to send an international Commission (which France and Britain then boycotted) to discern the views of the Middle Eastern populations. They let J. H. Harris, the energetic Secretary of the British Anti-Slavery Society—doing his best, one civil servant complained, to have the Society 'recognized as one of the Great Powers'—argue for stringent international oversight, a proscription on land transfers, and the establishment of some sort of 'Court of Appeal' before which native representatives could be heard.⁴² They did not grant an audience to the first Pan-African Congress, convened in Paris by W. E. B. Du Bois to assert the rights of peoples of African descent to be consulted about the continent's fate, although Du Bois did meet with Beer and a few other advisors to Wilson.⁴³ Appeals for consultation or autonomy were coming in from populations across Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific, but the Council did not acknowledge them.⁴⁴

Until 7 May, however, no further decisions were made. Instead, the principals turned to their seconds to sort out matters behind the scenes. Wilson left negotiations over mandates to Beer and his confidential advisor, 'Colonel' Edward House, Clemenceau to his Colonial Minister, Henry Simon, and Lloyd George to his Colonial Secretary, Viscount Alfred Milner, who was called over to Paris to craft a system with which all parties could agree. Milner had mixed feelings about that. One of the great imperial proconsuls of the Edwardian period, he had been an expansionist High Commissioner in South Africa and the patron of a talented group of young imperial officials before serving as part of the tight cabal guiding war policy under Lloyd George. He had emerged from the First World War certain that Britain's imperial power and not much else shielded the world from anarchy, and while he was willing to gamble on a 'League of Nations', Milner, like Smuts, thought of it mostly as a mechanism for universalizing British norms and practices. A pragmatist and a patriot, he had read the reports of Lloyd George's coercion of the Dominions' premiers 'not without anxiety', believing that whatever was done elsewhere, South West Africa and the Pacific colonies 'should be handed over *simpliciter* to the British flag'.⁴⁵

The first job of the British Empire's delegation, Milner thus decided, was to 'try to clear our own minds as to what we wanted' before worrying about

the complexities of negotiations with the other powers. In a crucial memorandum dated 8 March, he recast the system as a British imperialist might. He left the 'A' territories aside, for as the war in the Middle East was continuing, nothing much could be done there but to wait and see. When it came to Africa, however, Milner began by pushing League sovereignty—central to Wilson's conception—off the table. Sovereignty was a technical question of interest to lawyers alone, he argued rather disingenuously: the crucial point was that 'actual authority' would be exercised entirely by the mandatory power, which was 'in the position of a man receiving a property subject to certain servitudes'. This was a formula that implicitly still vested sovereignty in the imperial power, and indeed, in the case of the 'C' mandates, Milner thought those servitudes so slight that the territory could be incorporated into the administering state. Nor could he see any particular impediment to bringing a 'B' mandate (he was thinking here of East Africa) into administrative union with a neighbouring colony. In sharp contrast to the plans circulated by the Anti-Slavery Society, Milner made no attempt to define the League's powers, clearly feeling that the less said about that the better.⁴⁶ From some early meetings with Henry Simon and Albert Duchêne, Milner knew how little the French liked the idea of League oversight, but in his system at least, there was little 'oversight' to which they could object.⁴⁷

On 7 May the Supreme Council finally allocated the African mandates. Unsurprisingly, occupiers were everywhere confirmed as mandatories, although the whole of German East Africa (including Rwanda and Burundi, now occupied by Belgium) went to Britain, and Britain and France were asked to make a joint recommendation about Togo and Cameroon.⁴⁸ Milner then tried to settle all the remaining questions. He and Simon met repeatedly with the Italians and together resisted their extensive North African claims.⁴⁹ He met with the Belgian delegation, and—to the disgust of Beer, his own Under-Secretary Leo Amery, Lord Curzon (soon to take over as Foreign Secretary), and the Anti-Slavery Society, all of whom had the lowest possible opinion of Belgian colonial rule—was persuaded by the impeccably prepared Pierre Orts to let Belgium retain Rwanda and Burundi.⁵⁰ And he met bilaterally with Simon about Togo and Cameroon, initially amicably agreeing that the 'small strips' of Togo should simply be incorporated into the neighbouring French and British colonies, 'without any question of a mandate',⁵¹ only to be told by Lloyd George that the Supreme Council had by no means agreed that West Africa could be excused from the regime.⁵² Had Milner and Simon been left to their own devices, they might have made short work of the mandates system altogether.



Figure 1.3 East African *Schutztruppen* on parade in Berlin, 2 March 1919, led by Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. Heinrich Schnee, last Governor of German East Africa, is third, in the dark uniform.

But as Lloyd George realized, the allies needed the mandates system, for it was the only defence against a charge of simple annexation. On 7 May, the very day the territories were allocated, the German delegation received the draft peace terms, which provoked mass meetings, protests, and a week of ‘national mourning’.⁵³ The ‘war guilt’ clause and the territorial losses in the East probably hit hardest, but the requirement that Germany renounce the overseas colonies was also a blow. Two months earlier, Germany’s ‘undefeated’ General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck had led the just-repatriated East African *Schutztruppe* in their colonial uniforms through cheering crowds in Berlin (Figure 1.3). Germany’s colonies, the German delegation insisted, were now more necessary than ever, providing vital raw materials, markets, and space for settlement to the shrunken new Republic. Moreover, ‘as one of the great civilized races, the German people have the right and duty to co-operate . . . in the education of undeveloped races, the common task of civilized humanity’, and would willingly govern ‘in trust’.⁵⁴ The allies retorted that Germany had forfeited that civilizational standing entirely. It had unleashed a war that was ‘the greatest crime against humanity and the

freedom of peoples that any nation, calling itself civilized, has ever consciously committed'. The record of German colonial rule made it impossible 'to entrust to her the responsibility for the training and education of their inhabitants'.⁵⁵ Few phrases would rankle more.

And with that, on 28 June 1919, Germany's new Social Democratic government was constrained to sign the treaty, at a ceremony that also brought the League of Nations into effect. But while the Covenant was included in that text, the mandates were not, for Milner hadn't secured agreement. Although a Commission under his chairmanship was kept in session in London through July and early August, it still made little progress.⁵⁶ One problem was the dogged Japanese objection to the omission of the 'open door' clause from the 'C' mandate texts—a decision taken to enable Australia to maintain its exclusion of non-whites⁵⁷—but a second and more intractable one was that the French now hoped to dispense with the system altogether. As the Foreign Office's legal advisor explained, the French intended to make liability for military service universal across French West Africa and did not want to be bound by any agreement that might make that difficult,⁵⁸ nor would they discuss 'A' mandates at all.⁵⁹ After a final meeting of the Commission on 5 August, which the French boycotted, Milner gave up.⁶⁰ The French were determined to 'just be squatters,' he reported privately to Foreign Secretary A. J. Balfour, and 'like other squatters they will, by mere lapse of time, become owners'.⁶¹

Milner didn't much care. He was an imperialist far more than a League man and was also one of the few who didn't think the British should try, as he put it, to 'diddle the French out of Syria'.⁶² But for those British statesmen committed to the League, not to mention those committed to Faysal, French prevarication was profoundly worrying. Robert Cecil, Balfour, and the newly appointed Secretary General of the League, Sir Eric Drummond, all urged Milner to keep the Commission in session to draft the Middle East mandates—with a clause, Cecil helpfully suggested, specifying that each territory was now 'an independent state under the guarantee of the League of Nations', language entirely unacceptable to both Britain and France.⁶³ Eight months earlier, with France's position in the Middle East negligible and Wilson ascendant, Britain had rebuffed French overtures; now, with the American star waning, it was the French turn to put Britain off. Milner was about to go to Egypt to devise a new constitutional settlement, and Cecil now suggested that he set the standard by placing Egypt under mandate—a request that generated one of Milner's most astute letters.

'I have . . . always been favourable to the "mandate" principle,' Milner told Cecil—not least because he regarded it as 'nothing more than the clothing in a definite form and investing with international authority of the kind of system which we have in practice been trying to work out in Egypt'. Indeed, if other Ottoman areas had been put under mandate, Britain might well consider whether to 'complete the edifice' by putting Egypt on the same footing. But no such mandates had yet been created, and:

We really cannot go on playing at this game of mandates all by ourselves. Before I would agree to putting any portion of the world, which we at present control, under a mandate, I should want to feel much surer than I do that the mandatory system is going to work. At present, it is not too much to say that nothing has been done to make it a reality except what we have done (I might almost say what *I* have done), and that we have not succeeded in imposing its restrictions upon anybody but ourselves.

The French, Milner noted, had 'firmly declined to accept one fundamental provision of the mandate which happened not to suit them', and had since made clear that they were disinclined to accept a mandate in West Africa at all.

And who was going to make them do so? No one but Britain and the United States really wished to make the League of Nations a reality, and the United States 'seems to me less and less inclined to put any weight into the effort to make it an effective force'. Britain could not therefore afford to quarrel with France, nor should it accept all the nuisance of giving people 'who object to being governed at all . . . the right to haul you over the coals before an international tribunal' unless by doing so they established the authority of the League 'all round'. Milner had every intention of trying to give Egypt a constitution 'on what I might call mandatory lines' but would not open Egypt up to international interference unless there was some chance of the regime being accepted by other powers.⁶⁴ And with that, he left for Egypt.

What Milner failed to acknowledge, of course, was that the 'fundamental provision' to which the French objected—the ban on military recruiting—was one that undermined French security while leaving British power intact. West Africa was the French Empire's main reservoir of military manpower, as India (and not Africa) was Britain's—and one can imagine Britain's response had France proposed demilitarizing the Indian subcontinent in the interests of world peace. With the election of the right-wing Bloc National government in November 1919, with Wilson and the troublesome Monsieur Beer back in the United States, and with Senegalese and Moroccan troops arriving in the Levant, France had little reason to compromise.

That winter the prospects of the mandates system reached a nadir. The Versailles Treaty was running into trouble in Congress; although few knew this, Wilson had suffered a debilitating stroke and would never regain his strength. Mercifully, the League's supporters could not foresee how vindictively the United States would turn on its offspring: in 1922 and 1923 the Republican administration of Warren Harding would leave its letters unanswered while compelling each mandatory power to negotiate a separate treaty guaranteeing the United States equal rights in each territory—a wearying process that further delayed ratification of the mandate texts.⁶⁵ But March 1920 was bad enough, for the US Senate rejected the Treaty for the final time and George Louis Beer—the man slated to head the Mandates Section in Geneva—suddenly died. The mandates system as an Anglo-American project was over.

Creating facts on the ground

American retreat made one thing crystal clear: Britain and France would have to reconcile. With no prospect of an American presence in Armenia or Anatolia, the British swiftly concluded that their bread would after all be buttered on the same side as the French. The Sykes-Picot agreement once again providing the framework, British officials accepted that they could not interfere in the French 'zone'. In return, they made clear that Palestine was none of France's business. Between late 1919 and early 1921, in a series of often acrimonious private meetings and by creating 'facts on the ground', the two imperial powers came to terms (Figure 1.4).

The public face of that agreement was the San Remo conference of April 1920. There, the Supreme Council finally allocated the Middle East mandates. Mesopotamia and Palestine went to Britain, and Syria (including Lebanon) to France; the two powers also initialled a secret agreement granting France a quarter of Iraqi oil. Yet, what was achieved at San Remo was not the common programme imagined by Wilson and Smuts but something more like an agreement to disagree. Thus, while the French and the Italians made clear their dislike of the Zionist cast of the Palestine mandate and objected especially to language pledging to safeguard only the non-Jewish population's 'civic and religious' and not their 'political' rights, they accepted Curzon's strained claim that 'in the British language all ordinary rights were included in "civil rights"'.⁶⁶ Weizmann, present at San Remo, was euphoric: the agreement was 'as significant as the Balfour Declaration'.⁶⁷ In return, the British confirmed their disengagement from Syria.



Figure 1.4 Allies at odds: First conference of Hythe, May 1920. Left to right: Philip Sassoon, General Weygand, Marshal Foch, Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, ?, David Lloyd George, Philip Kerr, Alexandre Millerand, François Marsal, Austen Chamberlain, G. Camelqueck, and Maurice Hankey.

The two powers then moved to create the Middle Eastern states and borders they desired. In the French zone the disposition was largely the brainchild of Robert de Caix, now appointed Secretary General to the new High Commissioner to Syria, the devoutly Catholic veteran of the Moroccan campaigns General Henri Gouraud. Together, from their base in Beirut, Gouraud and De Caix would remake the map of Syria. Their first act was to ensure a separate existence for Lebanon. A separate Lebanon, Faysal had told the American commissioners sent to discern local views in July 1919, was ‘an unnatural idea’ inspired by the occupying French: ‘Syria’ was a national unit, of which Lebanon was an integral part. Not all inhabitants of what became ‘Lebanon’ agreed, with the Maronite community of Mount Lebanon particularly anxious about Faysal’s agenda. Adept lobbying by



Figure 1.5 Architects of mandate Syria: General Gouraud and François Georges-Picot, front and centre, on the steps of the Eglise latine, Beirut, 23 November 1919; Robert de Caix in a dark suit directly behind and to the right of Picot.

Patriarch Hawayik won a promise from Clemenceau in November 1919 of an independent Lebanon, and at Gouraud's insistence largely Moslem areas claimed by 'our Lebanese clients... the main foundation for our influence in Syria' (including the Biqa valley, Beirut, and Tripoli) were placed within it (Figure 1.5).⁶⁸ On 1 September 1920, Gouraud announced the establishment of 'Greater Lebanon' under French mandate.⁶⁹

By then, the Faysali state had also been swept away. The Commission led by the Americans Henry King and Charles Crane which had travelled through Syria and Palestine in the summer of 1919 had concluded that the Syrian population was implacably opposed to French rule, but its report was never made public and—except in mobilizing local opinion—had no effect.⁷⁰ Through 1919, Allenby had kept some 45,000 British troops in Syria, compared to a mere 8,000 for France,⁷¹ but towards the end of the year those forces began pulling out, leaving Faysal to make the best deal with the French that he could. Summoned to Paris in October, he was read out terms. France would recognize the 'independence' of the Arab state, but

in exchange French advisors would organize its administration, army, and police; France would defend its borders and handle its foreign relations; and economic concessions would be granted preferentially to France—a requirement in violation of Article 22 itself.⁷² Most reluctantly, Faysal accepted this ultimatum—‘he had been handed over tied by feet and hands to the French,’ he told one British officer⁷³—but Syrian nationalists did not. On 8 March 1920, the day the US Senate rejected the Versailles Treaty, a Syrian General Congress meeting in Damascus proclaimed Syria an independent state ‘within its natural boundaries’—that is, including Lebanon and Palestine—and named Faysal its king.⁷⁴ When the San Remo decision to confer the mandate on France was announced the next month, Faysal refused to accept it.⁷⁵

Gouraud and De Caix would not let that defiance stand. The Quai d’Orsay had already secured an absolute commitment of British non-intervention, whatever action the French took,⁷⁶ and that May, De Caix negotiated an armistice with Turkey—a move, Faysal wrote Lord Curzon, that signalled Gouraud’s intention ‘to find some excuse for starting military operations against my Government in Damascus’ (Figure 1.6).⁷⁷ He was right: in a long



Figure 1.6 King Faysal, on a white horse, inspecting troops in front of the Hotel Baron, Aleppo, June 1920.

memorandum outlining his plans for Syria, De Caix had already decided on the expulsion of the Faysali government. 'Not only was a Sharifian monarchy something artificial and absolutely alien to the traditional aspirations and divisions in the country', but it had also been dreamed up by 'English Arabophiles' as a weapon to use against France. The English aim, De Caix wrote bitterly, had been to arouse Arab nationalism in Syria while keeping Mesopotamia untainted, 'and thus to use it to expel France from Syria'. No compromise was possible: instead, France must oust Faysal and divide up the territory. Lebanon and the Kurdish and Turkish areas would be given separate administrations, while Syria itself would be carved up into eight or nine loosely federated statelets. It was entirely a plan to divide and rule.⁷⁸

With French troop strength now up to 80,000, the denouement came only days later. London having instructed Allenby not to respond to Faysal's appeals,⁷⁹ on 24 July 1920 the Sharifian forces battled French Senegalese and Moroccan troops for some eight hours on the plains of Maysalun outside Damascus (Figure 1.7). Artillery and aircraft were heavily used, Gouraud reported to Paris, and Faysal's war minister was found dead on the field.⁸⁰



Figure 1.7 General Gouraud, on a white horse, inspecting French Senegalese troops before the battle of Maysalun, July 1920.

In Britain, the news was received with consternation. In the House of Commons a few days earlier, Ormsby-Gore and Cecil had denounced French behaviour as absolutely in conflict with the principles of the Covenant, but were told shortly that Britain had no grounds for complaint. France was merely seeking to enforce order and ensure respect for the mandate—precisely the same policy that Britain was pursuing in Mesopotamia.⁸¹ Lord Curzon, who had just replaced Balfour as Foreign Secretary, had a quiet word with Philippe Berthelot, Secretary General at the Quai d'Orsay, saying that Britain had obligations to Faysal and would not view his 'disappearance... without some concern'—but beyond this warning, Britain would not intervene.⁸² Faysal and his supporters fled and within days were in Palestine.

The Mesopotamian parallel was an apt one, for in the summer of 1920 the British zone was also in flames. The Anglo-French declaration of November 1918 promising local self-government had been read out in Baghdad as in Damascus and Jerusalem, but the acting Civil Commissioner there, army officer Sir Arnold Wilson, was persuaded that the local Arabs had no desire for self-government and had imposed an 'Indian' style of direct administration instead. That summer, the Shi'a tribes of the Euphrates allied with urban (mostly Sunni) nationalists to unleash a major rising aimed at forcing out the infidel occupiers. By November the British had re-established control, but only through heavy use of air power and at the cost of some £40 million.⁸³

Yet even as costs mounted and battles raged, those distinctive British ideas about 'independence' reasserted themselves. 'The time has gone by when an Oriental people will be content to be nursed into self-government by a European power,' one Foreign Office advisor had written in May 1920; given those awakened national feelings, 'direct administration' in the Middle East was out of the question.⁸⁴ Its cost was too high anyway: militarily and financially overstretched, already struggling to find money and men for campaigns in Ireland, India, Egypt, and Eastern Europe, British ministers in London—and still more a restive British House of Commons—viewed Britain's Mesopotamian commitments as a costly extravagance. As the French poured troops into Syria, British ministers and officials in Iraq searched for another model.⁸⁵

A genuine feeling of compunction towards Faysal also shaped British thinking. 'Faysal alone of all Arabian potentates has any idea of [the] practical difficulties of running a civilized government,' Sir Arnold Wilson wrote

only a week after that monarch's expulsion from Damascus. Might Faysal be offered Mesopotamia instead?⁸⁶ Curzon agreed, and in early August he and Lloyd George informed the new French premier Alexandre Millerand and Philippe Berthelot of this plan. Millerand was, predictably, horrified. The British should understand 'how impossible it would be for the French Government to let Feisul, who had behaved in a traitorous manner to the French, occupy Mesopotamia'. The British, however, were not willing to back down. They were pouring blood and treasure into the sands in Iraq, Lloyd George told Millerand bluntly, and could no longer afford it. Moreover, while they had not protested when the French had ousted Faysal from Damascus, considering this none of their business, they had made a promise to establish an Arab state and intended to keep it.⁸⁷ Gouraud's fierce protests from Syria had no effect.⁸⁸ In Iraq, British political officers began organizing declarations by notables in their region in favour of Faysal's candidacy (no easy business in the Kurdish north, one sourly recalled).⁸⁹ On 23 August 1921, wearing a military uniform rather than his customary Arab dress, Faysal was crowned king of Iraq.

Palestine, too, was restive in the spring of 1920, its public life already marked by a pattern of rival mobilization by Zionists and the urban Arab population. In early April celebrations of the Muslim festival of Nebi Musa degenerated into a terrible pogrom, with Jewish self-defence units mobilizing in response.⁹⁰ The news that the Balfour Declaration was to be incorporated into the Palestine mandate aroused 'great excitement' among Palestine's still almost 90 per cent Arab population, and Allenby warned from Egypt that Muslims would regard the 'appointment of a Jew as first Governor, even if he is a British Jew, as handing country over at once to a permanent Zionist Administration'.⁹¹ Sir Herbert Samuel, a former Liberal Home Secretary and English Zionist (he had been present at San Remo to ensure the inclusion of the Balfour Declaration in the mandate), arrived to take over as High Commissioner anyway, and Britain's long and futile attempt to win Arab consent to Jewish immigration began (Figure 1.8). But Samuel's other effort at conciliation was more lasting: the formation of Transjordan.

In 1920 the disposition of the swathe of land east of the Jordan River was still far from certain. The region was sparsely inhabited and about half the population, estimated around 230,000, were nomadic Bedouins. According to the Sykes-Picot agreement, the region lay in the British zone, but insofar as it had come under state control at all, Faysal, who had won the allegiance



Figure 1.8 Herbert Samuel's arrival in Jaffa as the first High Commissioner, 30 June 1920.

of local shaykhs by providing mediation, subsidies, and services, had governed its northern regions from Syria.⁹² The collapse of that regime led to the re-establishment of tribal authority and some efforts by the French to exert influence as well. Samuel was eager to establish British authority, and with grudging consent from London he travelled to Salt in August 1920 to win the consent of notables to post British political officers in the territory.⁹³ But there were Hashemite interests to consider too. That November, Husayn's second son Abdullah arrived in Ma'an with an armed force of 300 to defend the family claim. Driven by his presence, anxieties about French influence, and the imperative need to keep costs down, a second 'Sherifian solution' took shape.⁹⁴

★ ★ ★

In March 1921 virtually everyone who was anyone in British Middle Eastern policy met in Cairo. The new Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill, attended along with a host of Britain's top military brass, and Percy Cox and Herbert Samuel, High Commissioners respectively for Iraq and Palestine, brought their most important officials. There, the 'Sharifian solution' was

ratified. Britain would support an Arab government in Iraq; the Royal Air Force would be entrusted with defence, ‘pacifying’ the Kurdish and tribal populations from the air; an Anglo-Iraq Treaty would be negotiated regulating the relations of the two states; and Faysal would be offered the throne. The group was less sure about Abdullah, but they agreed to give him a trial in Transjordan, supported by a British subsidy and British officers.⁹⁵

Watching this process from Beirut was, of course, Robert de Caix, and at the end of March he travelled to Jerusalem for a word with Churchill, who was meeting there with Samuel and Abdullah following the Cairo Conference (Figure 1.9). He was supposed to smooth Anglo-French relations, but how could he do that when the policies of the two states were so diametrically opposed? In allying with the Arabs, De Caix warned, ‘England was playing with a force that it would not be able to master’, one that would inevitably affect France as well. Churchill retorted that France’s expulsion of Faysal had caused Britain difficulties of its own, and that Britain was as free to organize administrations in its zone as the French had shown themselves to be in theirs.⁹⁶



Figure 1.9 Architects of mandate Palestine in Jerusalem, 28 March 1921: Emir Abdullah, Herbert Samuel, and Winston Churchill.

And there we must leave the two imperial powers in 1921, glowering at one another across the Sykes-Picot line. They had come, finally, to terms, accepting the relative spheres set by occupation in Africa and by secret treaty in the Middle East. But the idea that they were colluding could not be more far-fetched, for they were hardly even on speaking terms, and the system they were supposed to be running—the mandates system—was scarcely to be seen. Its Anglo-American foundation had crumbled, and French antipathy to the whole project ran unchecked. But its supporters—at this stage a polyglot assortment of (mostly British) internationalists, humanitarians, and lawyers, with the odd League official thrown in—still had one trick up their sleeves. ‘Conversation *à deux* gives opportunities for unreasonableness on the part of one of the negotiators which would not present themselves if there were outside participants,’ Robert Cecil advised shrewdly: it was time to bring more voices into the room.⁹⁷ And where were those to be found? If the mandates system were to become a reality, Britain would have to look to Geneva.

TWO

Rules of the Game

Monsieur Avenol [French Deputy Secretary General] said that... the Secretariat... had no administrative or executive power of its own, nor had its members the duty, or the right, of initiating policy... All power of initiative thus rested in the Members [States] of the League.

Professor Rappard, while admitting the officially impersonal character of the Secretariat, set against this the position in actual fact, namely, the very real influence of members of the Secretariat upon opinion in League matters, and in particular the recognised system whereby the Council's decisions were prepared by its servants—its intelligent and responsible servants—in the Secretariat.

League of Nations Directors' Meeting Minutes, no. 74, 28 February 1923¹

By the summer of 1920 the mandates system was a naked and shivering shadow of its Wilsonian self. Occupiers had been named 'mandatories', but not a single mandate text had been agreed nor any oversight apparatus set up. Promises to consult local wishes—much less to build national governments—had been broken and those who contested the new dispensation exiled or crushed. But if that crackdown cemented allied control, it disillusioned and angered internationalists across the globe. 'The system of Mandates did not appear to have been received with very much sympathy by public opinion,' the Italian representative pointed out at the eighth meeting of the League Council held in San Sebastian, Spain, in early August 1920, four months after the San Remo decisions. 'The Mandates were regarded as convenient fictions of a temporary character.'² It was far from clear that the system would amount to anything at all.

And indeed, it could well have ended then and there. That it did not owed less to those ostensible architects of the mandates system, Wilson, Smuts, Lloyd George, and Milner—none closely involved in mandate matters by