

# INTRODUCTION

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For much of history, States in ancient and more modern times scarcely engaged in anything other than bilateral relations. Gradually, the plethora of interwoven and sometimes reversed alliances, together with improving overland and maritime communications, led to the initial foundations of an international order of nations. Early on in Europe, thinkers such as George of Poděbrady, the fifteenth-century King of Bohemia, or the seventeenth-century Frenchman Émeric Crucé imagined that lasting peace could be achieved through a union of nations.

From the outset, the idea of an international body, in whatever form, was linked to building what was hoped to be durable peace among nations. The treaties of the Peace of Westphalia, which were signed in the cities of Münster and Osnabrück in 1648 to put an end to the Thirty Years' War, can be considered to be the first multilateral negotiations to usher in a new European equilibrium. Despite all the conflicts in the ensuing 150 years, this general framework subsisted until the revolutionary wars at the end of the eighteenth century. It was only with the Congress of Vienna in 1814 and the Treaty of Paris in 1815 that real multilateral negotiation came into play to redraw the architecture of Europe, following the defeat of the Napoleonic Empire. The victorious Allies were not to be satisfied with peace treaties alone, but keen to ensure their continued existence, they devised regular congresses to maintain the new order of nations as the great powers of the day united in a Holy Alliance.

A century later, following the bloody worldwide conflicts, the winning powers decided to establish a League of Nations (LoN), which would ensure world peace through pacific conflict-resolution mechanisms, capable of guaranteeing—at least this was their belief—the validity of the peace treaties in 1919–1920, which had redrawn the world map. Although not perfect, the initial mechanisms of modern multilateralism were thus put in place. As Robert de Traz wrote in 1936: “In the 1919 system, the community of nations took shape, neither intermittently

nor fortuitously, but continuously through permanent institutions. It is no longer an alliance of political and military aims, but an organic ensemble based on a general doctrine. Internationalism is no longer limited to a poorly defined state of being, or a simple mindset, but is becoming a method and indeed a function.”<sup>1</sup> Although the LoN did not immediately accept the losers and its universality remained doubtful, never before in human history had the establishment of such an international organization, whose aim was to keep the peace, been attempted. Twenty years later, authoritarian regimes’ attacks on liberal democracies prompted the Second World War and signalled the failure of this first attempt at multilateralism. However, from 1945, the new Charter of the United Nations relaunched the international institution on a new footing, learning from past experience with the same aim of ensuring sustainable peace through improved international arrangements. From its outset and going further than States or governments, the United Nations included non-governmental organizations in the work of its technical bodies and thereby enabled civil society to become involved in multilateralism, even though those organizations were often established on the basis that they were dependent on neither States nor international organizations.

This book forms part of the hundredth-anniversary celebrations of the creation of the LoN and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the United Nations. We sought to go beyond customary congratulation in order to present critically the major achievements of the LoN and the International Labour Organization (ILO) and then those of the United Nations in Geneva over the past century. Their work has been so vast that this book does not aim to be exhaustive. It seeks rather to open windows onto different fields by bringing together historians and practitioners working in international organizations so that they might share their diversified approaches and visions of the work of these institutions.

The history of multilateralism defined as “cooperation among several institutional players in the international domain governed by institutional rules” may be considered to a great extent as the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert de Traz, *De l’Alliance des rois à la Ligue des peuples. Sainte-Alliance et S.D.N.*, Geneva, 1936, p. 172. (From the Alliance of Kings to the League of Peoples. Holy Alliance and LoN).

history of the international organizations themselves. Multilateralism today is very much part of the natural landscape of diplomacy, yet its invention, dating back to the nineteenth century, was inspired by very pragmatic concerns. It originated at the same time as the means of communication and exchange between countries were expanding prodigiously. The industrialization of European countries and technical progress in transport and telecommunications pushed States to organize collectively to manage this first phase of globalization. The birth of the International Telegraph Union in 1865 in Geneva and the Universal Postal Union in 1878 in Bern made it possible to send letters and telegrams all over the world, and the international treaty on railway transport of 1890 made it possible to establish international timetables and tariffs. Finally, in order to combat epidemics that were spreading through travel, the International Office of Public Health was created in 1904 and the International Office of Public Hygiene in 1907. In its first manifestations, multilateralism was therefore used to address economic, technical and health concerns by seeking to standardize conditions and regulations in several domains. At the same time, efforts were made to mobilize States to move towards conciliation and peace. The First World War and its panoply of horror pushed governments to reject the secret diplomatic practices of the nineteenth century and inspired the establishment of a new multilateral moral order. These two facets of multilateralism, namely technical cooperation and the preservation of peace, persisted throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. The tension between them creates ambivalence in the system. Progressively, the discussions and achievements made in the framework of multilateralism in Geneva gave rise to international expertise. From this point onwards, traditional diplomats had to work and negotiate with a wide range of experts in the various bodies of the LoN and the International Labour Office. Geneva became the capital of these new international practices in November 1920, when the Secretariat of the LoN moved there from its provisional headquarters in London and held the first meeting of its General Assembly. The LoN then devised and developed many activities in the city over the following twenty years. However, it was never be a truly universal organization and was spoiled by abuses of power in the system. This meant that it struggled to maintain its credibility with public opinion and governments alike. Although the LoN itself did not survive the Second World War, the

key idea that had inspired its creation—peace through international cooperation—endured in the United Nations system that came into being in 1946. One of our aims in the present work is to explore the multiple facets of multilateralism and examine how Geneva and Switzerland succeeded in participating in these processes. We look, for instance, at the role of a number of Swiss politicians at the end of the First World War, such as Felix Calonder from the Grisons, Gustave Ador from Geneva and Giuseppe Motta from the Ticino. They contributed to a redefinition of Swiss neutrality, defended Geneva as headquarters of the LoN and the ILO and involved their country in the new multilateral system. The statesmen and academics Max Huber and William Rappard supported them in this work. Switzerland was the only State to join the LoN following a democratic popular vote in 1920 and only joined the United Nations in 2002 after a similar vote. Indeed, Switzerland did not initially participate in the new multilateral order established after 1945. During the war, the wait-and-see attitude of Switzerland was criticized by both the USSR and the United States and placed the country in a position of diplomatic isolation from which it struggled to defend its neutrality; despite this, it did, however, manage to maintain the status of “International Geneva”. The European headquarters of the United Nations was established in the city in 1946 along with many new organizations, while others, such as the ILO, dating from before the war, continued to operate there. Two thirds of the activities of the United Nations system are now carried out in Geneva, making the city a centre of international cooperation and multilateral negotiation. In this book, we consider the many areas of activity of the LoN and then of the United Nations. They show the vitality of the LoN in responding to the economic, social and humanitarian challenges of the inter-war period. Whether it was the humanitarian response to the Russian refugee crisis or to the bankruptcy of Austria, LoN experts were able to mobilize the relevant circles and find original solutions. Our contributors also shed light on the scope of action of this organization, whose participating members were mainly European, but whose efforts were deployed across all five continents, albeit sometimes with limited success. The historians show how the spirit of colonization was still pervasive in the remote regions of Europe and how that influenced the solutions to the various conflicts. However, and this is where the ambivalence of this period becomes clearer, multilateralism ushers in new ways of

thinking and acting and allows colonized peoples and governments to make their voices heard.

The LoN also played a major role in the new discussions about the protection of young people and helped mobilize women around political, civil and social questions. Beyond the world of politics, it is fascinating to observe the ongoing effects of multilateralism. With this in mind, it is worth noting that the Second World War did not disrupt multilateralism per se, but was rather a cataclysmic episode that reinforced the sense that it was necessary to rebuild peace. The links between many of the LoN's programmes and the United Nations' technical agencies are well known, but these are clearly brought out in this book. In the political sphere, as in the social, humanitarian, climate and disarmament fields, the United Nations agencies in Geneva continue work that began in the inter-war period and sometimes even before.

None of these multilateral achievements would have seen the light of day without the men and women who conceived and brought them into being. First and foremost, the key figures were the Directors and Secretaries-General. The extraordinary personal force and temperament of Albert Thomas enabled the ILO to impose itself on highly resistant governments, and Dag Hammarskjöld's intransigence brought the values of the United Nations to life against the difficult backdrop of the Cold War and created the international civil service. In the management teams and at lower levels, there are formidable personalities in each agency who have contributed, each in their own way, to multilateralism. An international bureaucracy emerged, with its innovations and excesses immediately mocked or decried by many journalists and writers, at the forefront of whom was Albert Cohen and his mordant satire. The creation of endless committees, interminable reports and financial waste have played into the hands of critics who consider that these international organizations have cut themselves off from the real international issues. Nevertheless, over the course of the twentieth century, these civil servants surrounded themselves with capable people and called upon specialists who contributed to the development of the vast international expertise that today constitutes the strength of the Geneva-based organizations.

If we were to attempt an assessment of the work of the international organizations located on the shores of Lake Geneva over the past hundred years, we can consider that three major objectives have been achieved. Firstly, the international organizations have advanced the use of law in international relations. Each of them has produced numerous conventions in their own field that now constitute a normative basis that has civilized international practice, protected vulnerable groups of people, codified the way the world is organized in many sectors and has generally subjected diplomatic conduct to recourse to law in interstate relations. Secondly, the work of the international organizations has made the world less dangerous. The daily onslaught of bad news, the persistence of regional wars and the violence of attacks must not mask the underlying reality, quantified by some political scientists, that the world is safer today. War has been made more difficult to wage, particularly thanks to the introduction of preventative measures, conflict mediation and peacekeeping operations. Nuclear non-proliferation negotiations and treaties have reduced international tensions. Finally, the latest stated objective of multilateralism, namely to humanize the world and make it more accountable, has produced perhaps a more mixed result. Huge efforts have been deployed to protect refugees and children. Extraordinary measures have been put in place in the development sector to improve education, eradicate disease and reduce poverty, yet the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 are a reminder that the challenges to be met still seem to be as great as ever. In particular, we now need to think about the new challenges posed by digital cooperation, artificial intelligence, new forms of work, sustainable financing, forced displacement and climate change. The international organizations based in Geneva are equipped to meet these challenges. The experience built up over the past decades has enabled them to acquire an expertise that makes them well prepared for the future, despite the clouds gathering over the horizon. But we should not delude ourselves. Today, more than ever, multilateralism is under attack, no doubt because its failures at the political level, due in part to the isolationism of certain States, sadly overshadow its undoubted successes at a technical level. Mechanisms such as the right of veto in the Security Council, adopted in 1945 to remedy the flaws in the governance of the LoN, are proving in fact, in the way they are used, to be harmful as the United Nations has become truly universal or almost so. The rise of

populism is also affecting how multilateralism operates, by hindering international negotiations, particularly on climate emergencies and the universality of human rights. However, we have to agree that the one-hundred-year history of the LoN and the United Nations shows that peace “seen as a regulation of international relations, a synthesis of interests and positive cooperation”<sup>2</sup> owes much to multilateralism.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.