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Susan Pedersen, The Guardians. The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire,
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Susan Pedersen's new book "The Guardians" has been rightly praised as major contribution to the burgeoning literature on the "internationalism" of the interwar years. It offers a comprehensive and highly readable account of the League of Nations' Mandate System, based on a wide array of previously unused archival material. But the author is interested in more than an institutional and organizational history. Reconstructing debates and practices of international governance, she develops an intriguing new perspective on the beginning of the end of Empire and the subsequent triumph of state-centered universalism in the 20th century.

What was the Mandate System? Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations held that German and Ottoman colonies after the First World War would not be divided among the victorious nations as spoils of war. Rather these territories in Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific were to be governed by the "advanced nations" under the auspices of the League, based on the assumption "that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization". No one should be surprised, though, that the motives behind this system of international oversight were ulterior and that it would seldom live up to a high-minded idealism. Not only Sir Frederick Lugard, former governor of Hong Kong and long-time British representative in the League's Permanent Mandates Commission, understood the whole idea of the Mandate System to be more or less an internationalization of European imperialism in general and of the British Empire in particular.

Pedersen, however, tells a more complex story than to simply lament the continuities of colonialism or, on the contrary, to exaggerate the significance of the Mandates as step toward UN trusteeship and successive de-colonialization in the second half of the 20th century. Focusing not only on the Permanent Mandates Commission and its colorful cast of diplomats, experts, and lobbyists, but also on events on the ground, in the mandated territories of South West Africa, Syria, or Samoa, the book teaches us a lot about the dynamics of publicity and legitimacy in international politics. While it is hardly possible to speak of an effective or even benign way of League oversight, it would be shortsighted to reduce the deliberations in Geneva to an arbitrary imperial haggling, veiled with an empty rhetoric of humanitarian concerns. In fact, the crucial argument is that the inevitable rhetoric of humanitarianism and internationalism acknowledged what was desirable and which norms should prevail in the international realm. In that sense, all mandatory powers soon found themselves to be captives of their own pretense. When the Samoans voiced strong demands for self-determination in the late 1920s, for example, New Zealand as mandatory power struggled to cloak its selfish interests and bad governance in a language of benevolent tutelage. Other examples show as well that generating a favorable publicity around the world

became of paramount importance for colonial administrators and independence movements alike.

In these campaigns, the advantage would quite often “go to the party best able to deploy the skills of legal argument and textual interpretation” (p. 102). Legal scholars and students of international law might find those parts of the book most interesting that deal with the emergence, and contestation, of new international norms within the framework of the Mandates System. Writing as a professional historian, Pedersen is less interested in the dogmatic rigor of a legal argument than in the manifold ways it could be used by the different parties involved. Still, there is a lot to learn about how sovereignty was understood, formalized, and reshaped during the discussions about the legal status of the mandated territories. Attempts to clarify their murky standing in international law failed at first. Even though scholars and jurists like Quincy Wright tried to find a place for the Mandates in international legal theory there was a tacit consensus among the great powers not be bound by any strict definition. However, this reluctance began to unravel after the entry of Germany into the League which proved to be an unexpected catalyst for transforming the vague promises of article 22 of the Covenant into legal arguments with a normativity of their own.

This is an outstanding book. It deserves to be widely read by anyone interested in how the outcome of the First World War and the Paris Peace negotiations contributed to the crisis of Empire in the 20th century. Pederson’s “Guardians” shows the power of promises and moral obligations in the international sphere, and it reminds us that the precepts and principles of international law cannot be understood without paying attention to the political dynamics they rest upon.

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