

Europe And The League

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Washington, May 31.—The recent French election, with its overturn of Poincare, has not only had immediately considerable political consequences in international relations but is bound to have important and even decisive results so far as the League of Nations is concerned. When Ramsay MacDonald became prime minister of Britain, there was general appreciation of the fact that his foreign policy would revolve around the idea of giving to the League of Nations something of the position and influence Mr. Wilson had dreamed for it.

While Poincare was premier, however, there was small chance that this MacDonald purpose could be fully realized. It is true that after his overturn in the French chamber last April, Poincare formed a new cabinet in which at least two members were believed to be named because of their British views.

These two men were Loucheur and Jouvenel. Loucheur was a strong believer in Anglo-French co-operation. Jouvenel was perhaps the most conspicuous French champion of the League of Nations.

It was fair to assume, then, that even had Poincare lasted, France would have shared in bestowing upon the League at least a modest fraction of the power MacDonald desired for it. Yet it is probably beyond question that in his heart Poincare believed as little in the League as a very large number of his fellow countrymen. The key to Poincare is to be found in the fact that he comes from Lorraine, that in his own memory his countryside has twice been occupied by the Germans and that his family memories go back to at least two other invasions, those of 1814 and 1815.

For Poincare the real protection for France did not lie in any League Covenant, rather it was to be found in a series of alliances. That he would have preferred the British alliance to all others, goes without saying, but he insisted that any Anglo-French compact should be in fact an alliance, what it is now fashionable to call an old-fashioned alliance in which each nation pledged its armed strength to the other in case of war, such an alliance as bound France to Russia and Austria to Germany in 1914. And this alliance Britain steadfastly declined to make.

Poincare for Alliances
Under the circumstances, Poincare was driven to make such compacts as he could, and there was built up that series of alliances which bind France to Poland, to Belgium, to Czechoslovakia and are at least planned to unite France and Rumania and perhaps Yugo-Slavia. All of these alliances have the common foundation of a desire to preserve the territorial status created by the peace treaties and in the case of a number, a common menace coming from Germany.

This system of alliances was bitterly criticized in Britain, where it was regarded on the one hand as certain to bring new wars and on the other as a direct menace to British prestige and influence on the continent. It was not more popular in Italy, which felt herself become a world power but never-the-less condemned to see France occupy a dominating position on the continent. As for Germany, it was passionately denounced in Berlin as a French method of fastening chains upon the German people.

Lloyd George had endeavored to block this French policy, he had even undertaken to build up a British system on the continent, and his major play was made at the Genoa conference just two years ago. But his difficulty had lain in the fact that there was no common interest between Britain and the continental powers. France, like the other continental states which had profited by the war was ready to fight rather than see the decisions of the Peace Conference with respect to European frontiers modified, but the British were totally unwilling to pledge themselves to enter a new struggle just to aid Rumania in keeping Bessarabia, or Poland in retaining Eastern Galicia. In point of fact the British, Lloyd George included, were quite ready to see the Russians acquire both these provinces provided that at that price there could be peace in Europe.

Against Lloyd George, then, Poincare played successfully. He won the support of continental states at Genoa. After Genoa, his system of alliances and understandings continued to grow. When he marched into the Ruhr, there was no European combination to oppose him; indeed Britain stood alone in her outspoken objection. Moreover, before the Ruhr, French and Italian support of the Turk against the Greek had led to British humiliation and Lloyd George's personal disaster and dismissal. All through the passive resistance in the Ruhr, France stood secure from any influence.

Poincare Backed by French
So far, moreover, it is perhaps correct to say that Poincare had the support of the mass of the French people. France was weary of German evasion and France was equally weary and indignant at what seemed British selfishness. Poincare found French prestige at low-water mark. He had manifestly restored it. He had accepted the German challenge over reparations and had met evasion by occupation and passive resistance by military exploitation. Right up to the moment passive resistance broke down. I doubt if there was any considerable body of opposition to Poincare in France outside of communistic and extreme socialist camps.

Poincare's real decline began, one may calculate, at the precise moment when he failed to turn German surrender to advantage. France and

seen the Ruhr occupation as a sheriff's operation, but when the sheriff had seized the property, having overcome the resistance, then in some fashion actual payment continued to be lacking. Moreover France began to feel uneasy at the unmistakable severity of the criticism of the outside world and particularly at the sharpness of British and even some American accusations.

France did not feel herself militaristic or imperialistic, but she did feel acutely the fact that she was acquiring this reputation in the world. Moreover, although it was clear that Poincare had restored French prestige and given France not a little of the influence which she had exercised in the old days of the ancient regime and of the first empire, he had also earned for his country something of the old distrust of Europe and perhaps the eventual formation of new coalitions like those which had ultimately overcome both Louis XIV and Napoleon the Great.

France, the mass of Frenchmen, desired reparations payments. They also desired security with even greater earnestness, but most sensible Frenchmen had come to realize that the France of the Twentieth Century was no longer in the position to play the role of the France of other centuries, that the role was at once too great and too expensive, that it could mean only a brief period of European supremacy at most and then a long and perhaps final stage of weakness.

In that mood the French people finally overthrew Poincare. They had followed him in his occupation of the Ruhr. But, perhaps a little illogically, they were not prepared to follow him in a policy which without later rewards seemed certain to alienate most of Europe and particularly Britain and America. So, for the time being at least, France has renounced the Poincare system, which in its essence sought to establish and fortify French supremacy on the continent by a system of alliances.

Two Courses Open to French
There are two other courses open to the French ministry which is now to take office. It may seek to arrive at an understanding with Great Britain on terms which are possible. It may undertake the even more difficult task of reaching some form of arrangement with Germany. As between the two courses, one might conjecture that the preference of Herriot would be for Germany, since the mantle of Caillaux has fallen upon his shoulders, while Briand would by preference seek to restore something of the old friendship between Britain and France. But any understanding with Britain would now have to be based upon some considerable recognition of MacDonald's aspirations for the League of Nations. By contrast, an understanding with Germany would in the nature of things start with some form of association of the Ruhr and Lorraine iron and coal industries and at some stage, still remote, aim at Britain, if only economically.

Now we have had fairly clearly sketched what MacDonald would like to make of the League. He would not consent to any Franco-British alliance. He would not consent to any treaty of guarantee made directly between France and Britain. He would, by contrast agree that Britain would come to the aid of France, if she were wantonly attacked by Germany—and I think he would hardly hesitate, if it were left to him, over an agreement, to support Germany in case of a wanton French attack.

Far beyond all this detail, however, he would like to make of the League a body with real influence. So far only minor questions have been referred to the League. There have been wars since its creation, that between Poland and Russia, and that between Greece and Turkey rising to the dignity of considerable conflicts, and the League has not been able to act effectively. But there have been even more important disputes between Great Powers, disputes between France and Britain, France and Germany, etc., and the League has not been able to intervene.

So far, the League, despite its handling of certain affairs like those of Upper Silesia and Memel, has been no more than a side-show. Its best service, perhaps, that of salvaging Austria, has been economic rather than political and without any relation to peace or war. The great problems which still divide Europe, those of reparations, security, armaments and the like, have been discussed, so far as they have been discussed effectively, between nations over the green table, not around the Geneva board.

Ambassadors' Conference Dominant
The Conference of Ambassadors, not the Council of the League of Nations, has been the dominant force in Europe since the Paris conference adjourned. When there was no agreement in this conference, as was frequent, then there was chaos in Europe. In the meantime the League had been dealing with minor questions, creating and operating a machine which it was hoped by the pro-League might one day become possessed of sufficient prestige and experience to take over larger and more vital matters.

Of these the largest, obviously would be that of reparations and security, to take the two together; in other words, the greatest thing that could conceivably fall to the lot of the League to administer would be a settlement actually reached between Germany, France and Britain, with Belgium and Italy subscribing, this settlement to cover both the matter of German payment to France and some guarantee of peace in Europe, peace between Germany of her neighbors. Insofar as the financial phase was concerned, the League might repeat its Austrian operation on an enormously increased scale, insofar as the matter of security was concerned, it might provide the moral influence in any new dispute, it might, for example, decide whether some new threat to the peace of Europe were justified or mere aggression.

Now MacDonald is very sure to attempt to persuade Europe, which in reality means France and Germany, with Russia in the background, to consent to the expansion of the League. He is bound to seek to prevent the reappearance in Europe of rival systems of alliances, to one of which Britain will, in the end be forced to join herself, as she joined herself to the Franco-Russia combination before the World War. He will begin by insisting that Germany be permitted to join the League and he will seek to persuade her to join, having persuaded France to consent to the admission of Germany.

As I have said before, he had small chance of great success before Poincare was beaten. He has a real chance now of obtaining French acquiescence up to a certain point. France is going presently to retire from the Ruhr and French opposition to German admittance into the League can be assumed to disappear. France will watch the British campaign for the League with something like benevolent interest, provided only the expansion of the League does not involve the surrender of French claims for reparations and provided some way be found through the League to insure France against a German war of revenge.

Want League With Force
Yet nothing is more certain than that presently we shall see a renewal of the old battle between British and French conceptions of the League. The French will join the British in the effort to give the League authority, but it will insist that with authority goes power, that the League shall not only have the mission to decide, but the means to enforce decision. This was what Leon Bourgeois asked for the League in the days of the Paris conference, when he argued that the League should be endowed with a general staff and a standing army, or at least should be able to draw upon the allied and associated powers, who had become members of the League, for the necessary police force.

Falling such force, the League could not, in the French mind and in the minds of continental generally, function successfully and there could be no question of disarmament. The League would not be able to provide security, to insure protection to its members and its members would accordingly be compelled to defend themselves through the medium of standing armies. And with standing armies would come the question of combining standing armies, that is the old question of alliances.

The French election opens the way for a discussion which would have been of little significance had Poincare not been defeated, but unhappily it does not open the way to any obvious solution of the matter. The French people and the new French government are willing and ready to listen to a new international discussion of the League, so are most if not all continental countries. But this discussion is not of itself of immense promise, so long as there is no modification of the underlying elements in the problems to be discussed.

If you turn the administration of the reparations problem, as adjusted by the Dawes report over to the League of Nations how are you going to make Germany pay up, if she wilfully evades again? Who is going to use force and how is the force to be used? Some nation, one or more nations must agree to apply the decision of the League, but application may mean war, if Germany resists, war not with the League but with the nations of supplying the force to carry out the League's decisions.

Then what about disarmament, a proposition dear to the hearts of MacDonald and his political associates and to the friends of world peace in Britain and America. Suppose the League brings forward a plan of disarmament, who is to enforce it? Who is to make sure that while France is disarming, for example, Germany is not arming and that when France has disarmed Germany will not attack her? Because, it must be obvious the French will not scale down their army or the British scrap their fleet, save as they are certain of safety after the operation.

Mr. Wilson agreed to give the French a treaty of insurance, with Britain as a second guarantor, because he believed that in a short time the League would gain such moral influence that the physical guarantee would be of no importance. He gave it rather as a sop to French anxieties which he did not regard as real, than anything else and he did not really think he was giving much because he was satisfied that the guarantee would never involve us in any real responsibilities.

Germany the Obstacle
If any one could imagine that the Germans would come forward in good faith to join the League, renouncing their hopes of regaining lost lands and lost greatness, if it were conceivable that all the great powers of Europe were ready and willing to accept peace on the basis of things as they are in Europe, then it is clear that the restoration of mutual confidence would change everything. But no one can safely forecast such a situation at this moment and any adjustment now must be made on the basis of existing states of mind. That is the situation that is the well-nigh insurmountable obstacle.

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The desire for peace is not equal in all countries in Europe and it never has been for that matter. There are a number of countries which regard war as a lesser evil than the existing situation. None of them want to fight at the moment, but none of them would think of resigning the intention ultimately to regain what was lost in the last struggle. There are other nations which prefer war to the surrender of lands which they own now, mainly as a result of the recent war and none of these nations would think of surrendering the power to defend these lands, while there was danger that such surrender would involve ultimate loss.

M. Poincare dreamed of a combination of all the powers which had acquired lands in the last war and felt their titles menaced by ultimate German recovery to defend the Paris settlement by arms if necessary. But this purely defensive arrangement came to have obvious aggressive possibilities, just as French air fleets, designed to serve against Germany constituted a theoretical menace to Great Britain, whose air coasts were practically defenseless. For the moment the Poincare policy has fallen because France has been rather shaken by the unforeseen consequences of what had seemed to most Frenchmen only a policy of self defense.

France is then in a mood to listen to Ramsay MacDonald's proposals for a relative considerable expansion of the League of Nations. France after mature reflection and some little experiment, remains unconvinced that any system of alliances made with smaller European states is worth as much as a real Anglo-French understanding. To obtain such an understanding France is prepared to go a considerable distance with MacDonald in the matter of the League. If experimenting with the League results in the discovery of something more satisfactory than the system of alliances France is ready to accept it.

MacDonald Real Champion
But you must see that always the same objects will be sought not by France alone, but by Poland, Belgium, Rumania, Yugo-Slavia and Czechoslovakia, namely security in what they possess plus the payment of what they are owed. Not all are concerned materially with reparations but all are with security. Can Mr. MacDonald show these countries through the League a certainty of unchallenged possession? Can he show them in Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria and Russia the absence of any immediate or eventual challenge to their possession of a method of protecting this possession against any challenge?

Or—and this is perhaps the present question—can the Prime Minister show them a method by which the League can be expanded without any menace to their present status and with eventual promise for complete security? If there is a settlement between the Germans, the French and the British today it will be made outside the League and the Dawes Report will be the basis of economic adjustment while other similar programmes will cover territorial and military arrangement. But once these are made the great problem is to get them under the League of Nations, to make that association the executor of these agreements, with power to enforce and with equal power to prevent both evasion and unjust exactions?

Up to the present hour the League is no more than an experiment, an experiment conducted within very narrow limits and as yet not applied to any major problem. Mr. MacDonald now means to apply it to the largest problem in the world and the real future of the League depends upon his success. But for this year at least the League is bound to increase alike in news value and in world importance, for in the British Labor Prime Minister it has found what it has lacked ever since Mr. Wilson failed and disappeared, a real champion representing a great power, a statesman ready to back it with the full strength of his country and with that country's full consent, and on the whole Mr. MacDonald will have from France and from the Continent generally more of a hearing than Mr. Wilson ever obtained.

It would be an exaggeration, I think, to say that Europe is in any sense converted to the League, but after five years of chaos, it does desire a settlement and having passed through a period of idealism and a later stage of nationalism it is beginning to reexamine the League not as new gospel, perhaps, but rather as an available machine.

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