# Before UNESCO and the WHO

VICTOR-YVES GHEBALI

Jean-Jacques Renoliet, *L'UNESCO oubliée. La Société des Nations et la coopération intellectuelle (1919–1946)*, foreword by René Girault (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1999), 352 pp., FF180, ISBN 2-6384-7701-1.

Christel Taillibert, *L'Institut international du cinématographe international éducatif. Regards sur le rôle du cinéma éducatif dans la politique internationale du fascisme italien* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), 401 pp., FF180, ISBN 2-85944-384-3.

Marta Aleksandra Balińska, *Une vie pour l'humanitaire. Ludwik Rajchmann, 1881–1965*, foreword by Bronislaw Geremek, L'Espace de l'histoire (Paris: La Découverte, 1995), 399 pp., FF165, ISBN 2-7071-2485-0.

Any mention of the League of Nations tends to evoke the failure of collective security between the wars.[1] No one can dispute that the League failed either to prevent or to halt the events leading up to the Second world War. But it is only fair to add, as Winston Churchill declared, that the failure was not the fault of the League of Nations, but of the nations in the League. The League of Nations suffered from an incompletely regulated Covenant, structural defects in its institutions and a chronic lack of universality, but most of all from the (to varying degrees) irresponsible conduct of all the major powers. While dictatorial regimes in Japan, Germany, Italy and, later, the Soviet Union were guilty of brutal aggression which discredited the League, the United States' retreat into isolationism did the League enormous damage, leading to a permanent feeling of insecurity. As for the liberal democracies – France and Britain – they gave the League the *coup de grâce* in the 1930s by saddling it with their policy of appeasement. At the end of the day, the League perished because it proved unable to prevent the unleashing of the two great human passions stigmatised long ago by the Roman historian Sallust (AD 43): *avaritia* and *ambitio*, greed (for material riches) and the lust for power.

[1] The standard work in English, still not superseded, is *A History of the League of Nations*, by Francis P. Walters, sometime British Assistant Secretary-General of the League (2nd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960). Works in French include Pierre Gerbet, Marie-Renée Mouton and Victor-Yves Ghebali, *Le rêve d'un ordre mondial, de la SDN à l'ONU* (Paris: Editions de l'Imprimerie nationale, 1996), and Michel Marbeau, *La Société des Nations*, collection 'Que sais-je?', no. 3593 (Paris: PUF, 2001).

*Contemporary European History*, **11**, 4 (2002), pp. 659–663 © 2002 Cambridge University Press
DOI:10.1017/S0960777302004083 Printed in the United Kingdom

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777302004083 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The League's failure was global but not total. Too often its successes in preventive diplomacy (e.g. the quarrel between Sweden and Finland over the Åland Islands affair in 1920–21) and the peaceful settlement of disputes (the Demir Kapou frontier incident between Greece and Bulgaria, 1925; the Leticia affair between Peru and Colombia, 1933–34) are minimised or passed over in silence. Interestingly, it also inaugurated some practices more or less comparable to modern UN 'peace-keeping': it set up an international military commission to police the armistice line between Polish and Lithuanian troops around Vilna, provided an interim administration for Leticia, and monitored the withdrawal of foreign combatants from the Spanish Civil War. Also, the Council's measures to ensure a permanent settlement in the Åland Islands and Demir Kapou affairs are comparable to what we would now call 'peace-building': in the first case, the islands were restored to Finnish sovereignty on condition that an internal autonomy law was introduced to safeguard the rights of linguistic minorities (this is still used as a model), and subject to international demilitarisation; in the second, Bulgaria and Greece were required to reorganise their respective frontier controls.

It should also be remembered that if we measure the League's activities according to contemporary notions of 'global security', which extend it from the military and political into the economics, social and humanitarian spheres, they include some positive achievements such as the financial reconstruction of Austria and Hungary, loans to assist the repatriation of refugees in Greece and Bulgaria, and, in particular, wide-ranging technical support to China. Spurred on by a handful of high-ranking and enthusiastic international appointees imbued with the 'spirit of Geneva', the League's specialist services (the Economic and Financial Organisation, the Health Organisation and the International Organisation of Intellectual Co-operation, all directly answerable to the Secretariat)[2] notched up some solid successes. But despite its numerous and varied achievements, specialist textbooks still tend to dismiss the League of Nations as the Cinderella of international organisations. Most modern works generally give it a ritual – condescending and disdainful – mention, condemning its failure to preserve collective security while perfunctorily acknowledging its pioneering work in 'functional' international co-operation. Historians and students of politics have meticulously dissected the failure, but for many the often positive outcome of the latter remains *terra incognita*.[3] This makes it particularly gratifying to encounter three works which, each in its own way, enrich our knowledge of international co-operation via League of Nations institutions in the

[2] There is little recent work on these organisations. See e.g. Martin Hill (former League of Nations secretary), *The Economic and Financial Organisation of the League of Nations. A Survey of Twenty-Five Years' Experience* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1946); Neville M. Goodman (sometime Chairman of the League of Nations Health Committee), *International Health Organisations and their Work* (London: Churchill, 1952).

[3] But cf. Victor-Yves Ghebali, 'Aux origines de l'ECOSOC: l'évolution des commissions et organisations techniques de la Société des Nations', *Annuaire Français de Droit International* XVIII (1972), 469–511, and 'The League of Nations and Functionalism', in A. J. R. Groom and Paul Taylor, eds., *Functionalism. Theory and Practice in International Relations* (London: University of London Press, 1975), pp. 141–61.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777302004083 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fields of culture (Jean-Jacques Renoliet, Christel Taillibert) and health (Marta Aleksandra Balińska). Besides adding directly to our knowledge of the Organisation of Intellectual Co-operation and the Health Organisation, they also throw new light on the origins of two specialist United Nations organisations: UNESCO and the WHO (World Health Organisation).

Renoliet's and Taillibert's monographs on the Organisation of Intellectual Co-operation are thematically complementary, the first dealing with intellectual co-operation in general and the second with educational cinema in particular. Both began life as Ph.D. theses. The third work belongs to a wholly different genre, biography – the life of Ludwik Rajchmann, an international appointee who stamped his personality very firmly on the Health Organisation. Though written by Rajchmann's great-granddaughter, this book is more than a hagiography: it draws on private family papers and a dozen public archives to paint a tolerably objective intellectual portrait of a man of action imbued with the 'spirit of Geneva'[4] and deeply involved in the major intellectual struggles of his time.

The first part of Renoliet's outstandingly rigorous and detailed monograph traces the history of the Organisation of Intellectual Co-operation, from its slow and painful birth (1919–22) and modest beginnings (1922–24) to its growth (1924–35) and progressive emancipation from the League (1936–39), its collapse after the fall of France (1940–44) and its final liquidation and replacement by UNESCO (1944–46). Renoliet focuses on two key structures: the International Commission for Intellectual Co-operation (whose membership included Henri Bergson, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Paul Valéry and many other international celebrities) and, more important, the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, based in Paris, which became the main 'lung' of the movement. Renoliet explains with clarity and conviction how France, in its desire to increase its cultural influence to make up for its loss of economic power, put the Institute at the disposal of the League – and then promptly washed its hands of the whole enterprise, as much for lack of money as for lack of political will. The second part of the book deals with the functioning of the Institute: its material resources, state support, collaboration with intellectuals and non-governmental organisations, and finally its achievements. It is regrettable, given the quality of the analysis, that these achievements are not given a section to themselves. In his conclusion, the author argues convincingly that the organisation did not succeed in promoting a worldwide marriage of minds or in fostering attitudes conducive to world peace. He sees two main reasons for this failure. The first was non-participation by the great powers, apart from France: Britain, because of its distrust of French ambitions of hegemony after the 1914–18 war, the United States because it distrusted all state interference in culture, Germany because of its general aversion to the League (in other words, due either to the integration of culture with foreign policy or to the domination of international

[4] The expression 'spirit of Geneva' evoked the League's dedication to international co-operation and its working methods, and seems to have been popularised by Robert de Traz's *L'esprit de Genève* (Paris: Grasset, 1929; repr., with a foreword by Alfred Dufour, Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1995). There is an English translation, *The Spirit of Geneva*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777302004083 Published online by Cambridge University Press

relations by ideology). The second reason was the regrettably elitist approach which the League always took to culture, reflected in the very concept of 'intellectual co-operation'.

Taillibert's study of the International Educational Cinematographic Institute, though less meticulous and finished than Renoliet's, is equally worthy of attention. It is the first modern work on an institution that has been neglected both by students of the League and by historians of the cinema: an institution dedicated to fostering the international production, distribution and exchange of educational films in conformity with the aims of the League.

Taillibert begins with the new approaches to education in Europe after the 1914–18 war, the hopes placed in cinema (first developed in 1895) by the apostles of popular education, and its general attractiveness as an instrument of intellectual life. She goes on to study the position of the Institute as part of the Organisation of Intellectual Co-operation and explains why Fascist Italy, imitating France, put this specialised international institution at the League's disposal in 1928; this elicits the interesting fact that Vittorio Mussolini, the Duce's son, was actively involved with the Institute. The third part of the book is devoted to the Institute's activities up to 1933. It put together a systematic cinematographic archive, researched the technical and political potential of the medium (as a means of bringing nations together and promoting the aims of the League), published its own journal (the *International Review of Educational Cinematography*, later *Intercine*), investigated such questions as censorship, royalties and film conservation, and – last but not least – set up the Venice International Film Festival! It also promoted a convention for the international circulation of educational films (1933). Finally, Taillibert explores the new directions taken by the Institute after 1934: encouraging the adoption of a uniform, smaller format for film; promoting cinema as an art in itself; publishing an Encyclopaedia of the Cinema, and so on. She also describes the abrupt closure of the Institute in 1938 after Italy withdrew from the League, having been censured for its attack on Ethiopia. The work of the Institute from 1928 to 1938 was impressively wide-ranging, but did not survive its dissolution. The League's attempts to continue this work were cut short by the onset of the Second World War; and afterwards, the take-off of television sounded the death-knell of educational cinema.

Aleksandra Balińska's monograph on the Polish idealist Ludwik Rajchmann is not, strictly speaking, a book about the League of Nations; but the latter has an important part in it for the simple reason that Rajchmann directed – indeed, he almost *was* – the League's Health Organisation from 1921 to 1938. Its activities can be divided into three main periods, each with its own priority. The first was urgent action against the epidemics ensuing from the 1914–18 war; the second, preventive medicine (vaccination, etc.); and the third, the relationship between medicine and society – between food, living conditions and physical health. Rajchmann's influence was felt at each stage. This *beau idéal* of the international appointee, patron of Dr Destouches (later famous as a writer under the pseudonym of Céline), fought against typhus in eastern Europe and introduced the concepts of preventive medicine and social health into the international arena. It was at his direct insistence

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777302004083 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that the fundamentally Eurocentric League extended its health-promoting activities to Asia. Rajchmann, a pioneer of humanitarian intervention, was the originator and linchpin of the League's system of technical assistance (in the fields of public health, finance and transport) to nationalist China during the ten years when it was subjected to ferocious and unrelenting Japanese aggression. A committed intellectual who made no secret of his anti-fascist and pro-revolutionary sentiments, Rajchmann was a controversial character whom the Secretary-General, the intensely conservative Frenchman Joseph Avenol, made a point of expunging from the League during a bureaucratic purge in 1938 in the wake of the Munich crisis. But Rajchmann did not vanish from the international circuit. After the Second World War he was to play an important role in the founding of the WHO (the successor of the League's Health Organisation), and also of UNICEF, of which he became the first president. This is an exciting book, a lively and well-informed introduction to the internal workings of the League's secretariat and the multilateral diplomacy of the interwar period.

These three monographs are in striking agreement about two essential points. They underline the importance of charismatic and visionary administrators to the success of activities sponsored by this international Secretariat – Julien Luchaire in intellectual co-operation, Luciano de Feo in educational cinema, Ludwik Rajchmann in world health. Even more important, they reveal the illusory nature of functionalism – the idea, proclaimed by David Mitrany in 1943, that international economic and social co-operation could be conducted on purely technical, politically neutral lines.[5] The three monographs provide numerous examples of the politicisation of intellectual co-operation and approaches to world health problems.

[5] On Mitrany, see most of the chapters (including one by Mitrany himself) in Groom and Taylor, *Functionalism*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777302004083 Published online by Cambridge University Press