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The League of Empire

By Ron Jacobs
September 2, 2015

World War One was the first round of the long war that defined the twentieth century. Although this century long conflict is conventionally thought of as a series of wars, anyone with a consistent anti-imperialist analysis can quite easily perceive it as one long war. Of course, World War One and World War Two were the largest and therefore bloodiest conflicts of this 100 year conflict. However, when one includes several other conflagrations—from the various colonialist battles on the African continent to the more recent US-led conflicts in the far East, the body count of the earth's most recent millennium is almost beyond comprehension. The first few years of our current century reveal how little things have changed in this regard.

Despite the myths we are fed about it being about freedom and democracy, when considering the First World War, it is easy to see it as a battle among colonial powers for supremacy. Likewise, the negotiations after the end of hostilities were merely a continuation of those battles, with the victorious powers forcing the losing nations to accept their terms for the division of the spoils. Simultaneously, however, was a desire by some men in the halls of power for a new institution whose purpose would be the peaceful resolution of rivalries like those that led to the war. It was from this desire that the League of Nations was created.

However, even in its creation, there was a fundamental understanding that the colonial powers would remain colonial powers. The colonized peoples would not be gaining nationhood any time soon under the League's rules. Indeed, if certain forces inside the League had their way, such

nations would never have their independence. This is the subject of Susan Pederson's recently published history of the League of Nations. An epic and incredibly researched work, the core thesis of The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire seems to be that the League of Nations was both a challenge to the European colonial system and an attempt to continue that system. It was this contradiction that helped ensure the leagues demise. Nowhere was this clearer than in the establishment and maintenance of the mandates in certain regions of the globe.

The first page of The Guardians makes it clear the creation and administration of the mandates was grounded in a colonial mindset. These mandates, from the South Pacific to southern Africa and the Middle East, were the focus of much of the League's administration and were also the cause of many of its internal conflicts. As Pederson describes the creation of the mandate system, the reader is introduced to an interesting mix of well-meaning internationalists, anti-slavery crusaders, and just plain old unreformed European colonialists. The result of this mix of philosophies, intentions, and ambition was the creation of what could best be termed a colonialists club informed by paternalist and supremacist ideologies and underlined with a desire to steal the wealth and labor of the subject peoples.

The rest of this magnificent history of the League of Nations mandate system relates the story of how, in practice, this mindset was even worse than it sounds. It manifested itself in massacres of local indigenous peoples bordering on genocide, the manipulation of local rivalries to benefit European capitals, aerial bombardment of civilians in the name of pacification, and the never-ending theft of resources from the colonized mandates. Informed by racist and supremacist philosophies developed by men with similar motives and a certain ignorance of the human race, the story told in these pages is a tale of collusion between colonial governments and their henchmen to maintain a dying colonial order.

Speaking of henchmen, the story of one particular mandate is one almost certainly familiar to every reader. That is, of course, the story of Palestine. Pederson details the collusion between elements of the Zionist movement and the British government to prevent the possibility of a Palestinian nation in order to establish a future Jewish state instead. The series of actions undertaken with this goal in mind not only helped lead to the ultimate failure of the mandate system, it also led to the current situation of occupation and conflict that exists today in the former mandate and throughout the Middle East. It is while reading this section especially that Pederson's text reminds the reader of how much nothing has truly changed in the attitudes and practices of the western capitals' understanding of treatment of the rest of the world, especially as regards the nations and peoples of Asia Africa and the Middle East.

Despite the best intentions of some of the internationalists involved, the imperial governments made certain the league was structured to maintain and protect their interests. Naturally, those interests were in large part financial. Policies in both the remaining colonies and in the mandates were established to insure the colonial powers would reap the benefits at a rate much greater than any group in the subject nations. In what is now called free trade, the siphoning of resources from the latter group to the former combined with cheap (and sometimes forced) labor was part and parcel of the League's form of governance. Even when a formerly subject nation was

granted a nominal form of independence, as in the case of Iraq, that independence was, in Pederson's words, "safe for Empire."

Pederson's voluminous text makes a few things quite clear. Among those is the fact that the League of Nations was intended to prevent wars between imperial nations over colonies, not to support struggles for national independence by colonized peoples. This was apparent in its structure, bylaws, and methods of governance. Ironically, Pederson writes, its very existence paved the way for the success of those national liberation struggles in its attempt to prevent wars between colonial powers. Indeed, *The Guardians* is not just the history of an ill-fated attempt to rewrite the world order; it is also a history of how that order was rewritten in ways not foreseen by those powers that created the League. Furthermore, it is a description of how the machinations of the League of Nations foretold the century of bloodshed and struggle that followed.