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Philip Noel-Baker, the League of Nations and the Abyssinian Crisis, 1935-1936.

Gaynor Johnson.

When examining the existing literature on the League of Nations' approach to the Abyssinian crisis, it is impossible to escape negativity. The League's actions were too little too late and displayed an extraordinary lack of insight in to the motives behind Mussolini's foreign policy, especially in north Africa. The crisis represented the last straw, the final demonstration of how poorly equipped the League was to respond to any serious challenge to its authority. Consequently, after the 'resolution' of the crisis in 1936, the League was viewed by all but a few as defunct as Europe drifted closer to the outbreak of world war in 1939. And so it goes on. As a result, it would be a difficult task indeed, in the weight of the available evidence, to try to argue to the contrary, and it is not the purpose of this chapter to embark on such a task. Instead, this chapter aims to provide a reminder that those who had championed the League since its creation were well aware of its shortcomings and certainly did not view it with rose tinted glasses. This point is at best acknowledged but glossed over by some of the existing scholarship on the Abyssinia, and is overlooked completely by the majority. In this context, most references are to Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, whose promotion of the Peace Ballot in the summer of 1935 and his use of the League of Nations Union to resurrect public consciousness about the work of the League in Britain at least.¹

However, an alternative but revealing commentary on the crisis is provided by one of the other celebrated architects of the League, Philip Noel-Baker.² Like many liberal internationalists of his generation, Noel-Baker believed that it was Labour

party foreign policy objectives that were most in keeping with his sympathies, especially their emphasis on disarmament and collective security. For him, the foreign policy of the Conservative governments that dominated so much of the interwar period was too rooted in the reinforcement of potentially dangerous alliances that could result in Britain being dragged in to war. Noel-Baker's hatred of war had been forged by his experience of the diplomatic climate in Paris during the peace conferences of 1919 and by his subsequent role as a member of the League of Nations' Secretariat and Secretary to the British delegation to the League in the mid 1920s. His first direct association with Labour foreign policy came in 1924, when he became private secretary to Charles Cripps, Minister for League of Nations Affairs in the first Ramsay MacDonald administration. An unsuccessful attempt at election as a Labour MP in the General Election in the winter of 1924 led Noel-Baker to pursue an academic career for five years, during which he became a recognised authority on the history and theory of disarmament practises, publishing a book on the subject in 1926. Returned to the House of Commons as MP for Coventry in May 1929, he was appointed parliamentary private secretary to the Foreign Secretary, Arthur Henderson. At the time of the outbreak of the Abyssinian crisis, Noel-Baker remained convinced that the League would still be able to galvanise international support for an effective programme of disarmament and for a policy of collective security. The events of 1935-6 also coincided with a brief hiatus in Noel-Baker's political career. Having lost his seat in the 1935 General Election, he remained outside parliament until he successfully fought a by-election in Derby in July 1936, just weeks before the war in Abyssinia came to an end. During this time, he channelled his energies into canvassing Labour party support for a more proactive League involvement in resolving the crisis and in to writing, publishing *The Private Manufacture of*

Armaments in 1936.³ Unlike Cecil, whose defence of the principles of international law on which the League was founded was always that of a seasoned politician and diplomat, and unlike the much more profoundly intellectual Gilbert Murray, Noel-Baker's sought to give credibility to the League through a mixture of practical political advice and a variety of academic writing that drew much from his own experiences of international affairs.⁴ From this, it would be an exaggeration to claim that Noel-Baker's opinions made an enormous impact. They were directed at supporters of a party that formed only a minority part of the National Government throughout the Abyssinian crisis and were offered when he himself was out of office. But despite this, Noel-Baker's opinions should not be dismissed. In 1935, he was better connected to men with actual political power in Britain and in Europe than either Cecil or Murray who, being a generation older, were now relatively on the political margins, despite their involvement in the Peace Ballot of that year. He was also one of the few to propose alternative strategies for the League to adopt rather than restricting himself to lamenting the limitations of British and French commitment to its work. None of his ideas became policy, but they do provide an important reminder that not all of the League's supporters believed in 1935-6 that the only way in which that organisation could survive was through a metamorphosis into a body with military might at its disposal.⁵ It is tempting to see Noel-Baker as being naïve in that respect, not simply because the League's successor, the United Nation, later had an army at its disposal or because the elder statesmen of the British pro-League lobby were also in favour of such a change by this time. But that would be unjust. While offering dire warnings of the consequences of a weak League response to the Abyssinian crisis, Noel-Baker firmly believed that no matter how tense international relations became, no country would be foolish enough to trigger a

second world war. He was wrong of course, but he was not alone in believing this to be the case. And indeed many of those who believed that war would be averted because it was too awful to contemplate were also convinced that an important way of ensuring that did not come about was through the special diplomatic commitment of Britain and France to each other and to the cause of peace. On this point, Noel-Baker was less convinced than many of the strength of the Entente Cordiale, and its ability to weather the diplomatic crises prompted by Europe's fascist dictators. Hence a second theme explored in this chapter is the importance of the Anglo-French relationship to understanding the Abyssinian crisis. And in contrast to Noel-Baker's biographer, David Whittaker, this analysis of the internationalist's attitude towards the events of in Abyssinia suggests that he was not an idealist but that he tried to take a pragmatic approach to the crisis.⁶

The diplomatic origins and course of the Abyssinian crisis are discussed elsewhere in this book and so do not bear significant repetition here. However, there exist comparatively few accounts of the League's constitutional and diplomatic responses to that event. There are two of importance: the first by F.P. Walters, himself a League activist, is a two-part history that appeared in the 1960s.⁷ The second is F.S. Northedge's history of the League published in the 1980s.⁸ Walters' point is simple: the League had done its best with limited resources against a series of challenges posed to its authority made by increasingly bellicose dictators. The Abyssinian crisis was typical of this. Northedge set the League response within a broader diplomatic framework – that the League had been created by men incapable of recognising that the conduct of diplomacy in the decades after the Great War required a more robust approach than a reliance on the goodwill of nations to maintain collective security and the use of economic sanctions.

Northedge also compares the origins of the Sino-Japanese Manchurian crisis of 1931-32 with the Abyssinian crisis. The two events, he argues were quite different. The Japanese invasion did not constitute an act of aggression because of Japan's existing commercial links in Manchuria, but the same could not be said about the Italians in Abyssinia.⁹ This is debateable. The Italians had been endeavouring to broker deals with the Abyssinians since the end of the nineteenth century, most of which were based on trade and rights of access to the sea. What was different between the two crises was that during the second, the League made no attempt to set up an international commission to resolve the situation as it had done over Manchuria. Instead, it endeavoured to handle the discussions through the use of special commissions of the League Council. The League had been involved in attempts to resolve the dispute before the actual outbreak of hostilities. Between the Wal-Wal incident on 5 December 1934, and the skirmish at Wardair and Gerlogubi in January and February 1935, the League Council encouraged the Abyssinians and the Italians to settle their differences.¹⁰ The hoped for means of arbitration was not, however, provided by the League itself, but under Article 5 of the treaty concluded on 2 August 1928 that stated that if a diplomatic dispute between the two countries arose that could not be resolved, under no circumstances would either part resort to force, but would submit the matter to arbitration. But such means proved to be useless in settling the Wal-Wal dispute, causing anxiety in the Council to grow that should war break out, Britain and France would be drawn into the conflict. The Italians, however, were anxious that only the Wal-Wal question was subject to arbitration while the Abyssinians wanted the entire issue of Italian efforts to redefine the borders in all surrounding territory to be subject to the investigation. The Italian view prevailed although debates continued about suitable nationalities for the arbiters. On 3

September 1935, a team of two Italians, a French man, an American and the Greek Minister in Paris, Politis, agreed that the Wal-Wal incident was a minor infraction and not worthy of further investigation.

Studies of the Abyssinian crisis are right to emphasise the centrality of the volatile Anglo-French relationship in explaining why no diplomatic solution that favoured the Abyssinians was found to the crisis. This was not only true in the wider arena of British and French foreign policy, but also, and especially within the context of the League. In July 1935, an extraordinary session of the League Council met and was optimistic that the British and French would be able to broker a deal with the Italians to prevent war.¹¹ The negotiations took the form of a summit in Paris between the French Foreign Minister Pierre Laval, the British Minister for League of Nations Affairs, Antony Eden and Baron Aloisi, the Italian representative in Geneva, from 16-19 August.¹² But not for the last time, the British and French governments found themselves on opposing sides, with Eden siding with the Abyssinians. Laval was more inclined to accept the argument made by the Italians for an occupation on the grounds that Abyssinia was in need of social and economic reform in order to keep the its population in check and to stop them posing a threat to general Italian trading activities in that part of north Africa.

Consequently, when the Council met a fortnight later, little progress had been made on an Anglo-French solution to the crisis.¹³ However, an important development was the joint British and French suggestion that the Italians should be allowed to garrison troops in Abyssinia. Noel-Baker argued that this provided a good example of one of the problems with the way in which the League conducted its affairs. In an undated note entitled 'Rearmament and the Collective System', he argued that 'the wrong policy is the policy of international anarchy and power

politics'. To him, the discussions of the summer of 1935 suggested that the British and French viewed the crisis in dangerous nineteenth century terms of imperial conquest – the type of national rivalry that many had regarded as such an important cause of the First World War - rather than in the more open diplomatic terms that the League had been set up to promote. Abyssinia was a pawn in the activities of the Great Powers, with Italian requirements accommodated in some form despite the Italians being the aggressors.¹⁴ In a later note from the same period, his criticism was more scathing:

If the League is destroyed, we revert to international anarchy and the balance of power. Then all wars become wars of national policy, for in every war what both sides mean by self-defence is the defence of their own view of their rights and interests - generally over some such matter as colonies, or concessions, or maintaining the balance of power, or national prestige.¹⁵

In the eyes of old-school diplomats, the decision not to consult the Abyssinians was justified because Britain, France and Italy had signed an agreement in 1906 promising co-operation between them to maintaining the territorial sovereignty of Abyssinia. The Abyssinians had not been consulted then so there was little reason for consulting them thirty years later.

Yet, despite the willingness of the British, French and Italians to play Great Power politics, the Abyssinians were more willing than they to use the Covenant of the League as the principal weapon in their defence. While it could be argued that in the face of such overwhelming circumstances they had few other options, their approach was nevertheless measured, intelligent and showed no sign of desperation. The head of the Abyssinian delegation in Geneva, Jeze, requested that the Council to

take immediately action, even before the outbreak of hostilities. His suggestion was that under Article 15 of the Covenant, a committee should be set up to examine all areas of the Italo-Abyssinian relationship, that Britain and France should be members of this committee. Despite Italian objections, the Council of Five, as it became known, consisted of representatives from Britain, France, Poland, Turkey and was chaired by the Spanish diplomat, Salvador de Madariaga. The Council was to draw up a scheme of international economic and financial aid for Abyssinia, examine ways in which British and French imperial interests in north Africa could be protected in the event of a territorial adjustment of Abyssinia to accommodate Italian needs. This included giving Abyssinia access to the sea on condition that measures were taken to meet Italian grievances about the insecurity of its borders with Abyssinia and the lack of connection, except by sea, between Eritrea and Somaliland. The plans were rejected as inadequate by Mussolini in September 1935, while Jeze continued to promote the ideas as a basis for further negotiation.¹⁶

However, the plans came up against further problems when Anglo-French differences about how to resolve the crisis became more public. Sir Samuel Hoare, the British Foreign Secretary, was much more concerned with resolving the situation as soon as possible with a limited focus on the long-term consequences of the crisis. A speech made to the League Assembly on 11 September 1935 made it clear that the British response to the crisis over Abyssinia would be limited to responsibilities under the Covenant and nothing more.¹⁷ ‘One thing is certain. If the burden is to be borne, it must be borne collectively. If risks for peace are to be run, they must be run by all. The security of the many cannot be ensured solely by the efforts of the few, however, powerful they may be’.¹⁸ In contrast, Laval had his eyes fixed on the way in which the Anglo-French response to the crisis could create a precedent for the way in which

the League dealt with the territorial ambitions of Europe's other *enfant terrible*, Hitler. Thus, for different reasons, Hoare and Laval concluded that there was little to be gained by provoking Mussolini through the threat or use of sanctions or actual military confrontation. As Laval told Hoare, 'There ought to be no provocative talk of sanctions and no wounding of Italian feelings'.

Despite this, when Mussolini's forces finally crossed the Abyssinian frontier in October 1935, the most powerful members of the League had already concluded that their response to the crisis would, in effect, decide its final fate as a credible international organ of peace. On 7 October 1935, all members of the League Council except Italy decided to adopt the report of a committee appointed two days earlier to examine the responsibilities of the League now that the act of aggression had formally taken place.¹⁹ Italy was to be condemned under Article 12 of the Covenant which provided for the peaceful settlement of international disputes. As a result, all members of the League were required to impose sanctions on Italy as defined under the terms of Article 16 – the only time that this article was ever invoked in the history of the League. The Italian case for launching the invasion was made by Aloisi at the meeting of the Assembly on 10 October 1935, in which he argued that Abyssinia was a 'country which has no government capable of exercising its authority throughout its territory, whose frontiers are not delimited, which not merely fails to mete out equitable treatment to conquered peoples, but exploits them, subjects them to slavery and destroys them' was entitled to the benefits of the sanctions clauses of the Covenant.²⁰

While Noel-Baker agreed with the decision to apply sanctions against Italy 'in view of the flagrant and wholly unjustifiable aggression...which constitutes without doubt a much plainer and more reprehensible international crime than that of the

Kaiser in 1914', other more sweeping measures were also justified.²¹ The League Council should swell its ranks to include the United States, Germany and Japan.²² All three countries, of course, were currently not members of the League and, for different reasons, unlikely to (re)join. This suggestion therefore would have proposed huge diplomatic problems most of which would have been insurmountable. But even if these three powers had agreed to this request, there was not provision within the Covenant for extraordinary members of the Council to be appointed. The history of the Geneva Protocol a decade earlier had demonstrated how difficult it was to persuade the League to reform itself in response to outside pressure.²³ Furthermore, if the Covenant could be modified to accommodate these countries, it could muddy the waters when it came to the application of its other conditions, especially as a number of the articles, including Article 16, were couched in apparently ambiguous language. There was also the issue of the time that all of these negotiations would take given that the League was faced with a clear and present danger to its authority.

Noel-Baker did not favour British and French military intervention in Abyssinia, but recommended that the Suez Canal should be closed to Italian forces and that an Anglo-French air presence be sent to the region to police that.²⁴ Additionally, he believed that if Mussolini was in breach of the League Covenant, he was also in contravention of the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 that had outlawed recourse to war to resolve diplomatic disputes. As a result, every country should immediately recall their ambassadors from Rome. Thus for Noel-Baker, the League was only capable of providing part of the required response to the crisis - the use of economic sanctions. It was beyond the remit of that organisation to limit Mussolini's ability to provide logistical support for his invading forces or to provide the censure of a complete shunning of Italy by the international diplomatic community.²⁵ Nor did he anticipate

that the League, with or without external support, was capable of resolving the crisis quickly. As he told Henry Cummings, ‘this business is going to drag on in a thoroughly messy, ineffective and confused manner, probably with tempers rising on both sides, incidents multiplying as the Italians start stopping munitions going to Abyssinia, etc. and I still think it will end in war’.²⁶ He also believed that the British government would be powerless to stop this happening because of the strength of public opinion. Only months earlier, the British government had received an overwhelming endorsement of the work of the League through the Peace Ballot. Consequently, it would be electoral suicide to scale down a British commitment to the League at this time.²⁷ Noel-Baker was even more scathing and pessimistic about the situations to the French politicians with whom he corresponded. In October 1935, he told the future French premier, Leon Blum: ‘The thing is fast becoming a real disaster. If in the present circumstances the League cannot even restrain a war like this, when every card is in its hands, what hope can we have of ever making it an instrument to check Hitler and keep peace in Europe?’²⁸

There was not unanimous support for the imposition of sanctions within the League. The Austrian delegation had little desire to inflame relations with the Italians further by being party to them. Similar concerns were expressed by a number of other countries that shared a frontier with Italy, especially the Albanians and the Swiss, again indicating that Mussolini’s campaign in Abyssinia was viewed at the time as potentially the start of a wider process of territorial aggrandisement and not *sui generis*. Nevertheless, in October 1935, at a special session of the Assembly, fifty-four League members voted that Italy was in breach of the Covenant under Article 12.²⁹ The task of overseeing the implementation of sanctions was charged to a co-ordination committee, which began work on 11 October – known as the Committee of

Eighteen, chaired by the Portuguese diplomat, Vasconcellos.³⁰ Its work was divided into five sections: placing an embargo on exporting arms to Italy, withholding loans and credits, prohibiting the import of Italian goods, a ban on the export of parts for industrial plants, and to minimise the economic effects on the sanctionist states of the imposition of these sanctions. By 31 October 1935, fifty governments indicated their support for the first of these proposals, forty-nine to apply for the second, forty-eight the third and fourth, and thirty-eight the fifth, with the beginning of the implementation of sanctions scheduled for 18 November.³¹

The scrupulously democratic way in which League decisions were arrived at struck a profound chord with Noel-Baker. For him the League was a socialist entity and that only the Labour Party properly understood this.³² Only the international Labour movement was completely committed to the principles of collective security and mutual assistance. Noel-Baker's correspondence with the French socialist, Leon Blum, during the Abyssinian crisis reveals that he believed in the creation of a joint Anglo-French socialist League policy. A formal agreement that would give concrete shape to the hitherto nebulous idea of the Entente Cordiale would be concluded. This would operate parallel to the Franco-Soviet pact to ensure that the damaging politics of self-interest that had been allowed to permeate the work of the League through the activities of the Conservative-dominated National Government in Britain, for example, would not have the chance to do so again. Such a strategy would – and this point particularly appealed to Blum – give France a central role in the creation and implementation of the new League policy.³³ However, the reason why Noel-Baker wished to give the French such a role was not out of respect for their contribution to League efforts to find a solution to the Abyssinian crisis. It was, in fact, just the

opposite. In a letter to *The Times* two months before the Abyssinians capitulated, he had written that:

the half-hearted action of France about the Italian-Abyssinian war has gravely chilled our friendship. We do not like the way the French treat the League as a sort of particular umbrella, valuable for keeping France out of the wet, but when not so needed to be rolled up and used only for gesticulation. Had she thrown her whole heart into maintaining that authority of the League against Italy, the League would have succeeded...But France has been half-hearted, lukewarm, laggard, dilatory [and] ineffective in her support of the League against Italy.³⁴

If that situation were allowed to continue, the results for Britain and for European diplomacy were likely to be catastrophic. By ensuring that the countries with which France had the closest alliances had robust and proactive League policies, that would give the French little choice but to have the same. As Noel-Baker told Blum: ‘The fundamental foundation upon which alone any League of Nations can be made to work is...the cooperation of the democracies of France and Great Britain.’³⁵

Another feature of the League’s response to the Abyssinian crisis was that it revealed its processes were too slow to respond to the pace of events. The ability of the League to undermine its own effectiveness through excessively ponderous deliberations was not lost on journalists of the time. As the pro-fascist, anti-League *Saturday Review* noted in June 1935, whatever ‘the rights and wrongs of the Italian-Abyssinian quarrel, we ought to give thanks to Signor Mussolini for showing everybody the unreality of the Geneva Institution and what a myth this collective security inherently is’.³⁶ The speed at which the League worked was not just

problematic because of the delay of decisions that resulted with all of the implications that had for the conduct of international diplomacy. It exposed a fundamental flaw in the way in which the League had been established to conduct its business. Open and free debates in the Assembly with committees pouring over the finer practical and ethical details were all very well in theory. But they took no account of the momentum of international crises and of the fact that non-League members had little reason to respect the time it took for the League's grinding bureaucracy to come in to operation and for it to act upon its findings. An example of this is the debate about the imposition of oil sanctions against Italy, first proposed by the Canadian delegation to the Committee of Eighteen in November 1935.³⁷ The French and British governments were sceptical about taking such a step, fearing that that combined with a growing British naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean might be construed by Mussolini as an act of war. Hoare's focus thus shifted away from the League to securing a promise of French support in the event of an Italian attack on the British fleet. On 18 December 1935, the Committee of Eighteen took upon the question, intending to reach a definite decision about oil in the light of an experts report on how the existing sanctions without reaching any conclusion about oil, proposing instead the creation of a second committee to examine that question.³⁸ However, this subcommittee, charged with examining the extent to which an embargo on oil might affect Italy's ability to cover its oil requirements, did not present its final report until 12 February 1936.

The public watchword of the British, French and Soviet members of the League during the early months of the crisis was the importance of maintaining the principle of collective security that formed the bedrock of the Covenant. To maintain the League as it had been envisaged by its creators implied a willingness to act selflessly

if necessary and to come to the aid of a fellow member in their hour of need. Noel-Baker was not convinced that such altruism existed, especially among the British and French delegations, nor was he convinced that the entire foundation of the attitude of those countries towards Italy was morally just. When reports began to circulate about Hoare's negotiations with Laval about a compromise deal between the Italians and the Abyssinians, Noel-Baker told Kingsley Martin of the *New Statesman*,

There should be a strong protest at the procedure of the two great Powers bargaining with the aggressor as to how much of the territory of the victim of aggression they think he ought to have as the price of peace...[Italy and Abyssinia] are not just Parties to a dispute in which we are mediating; one is a victim of aggression we are sworn to protect and the other is the aggressor whom we are pledged to stop.³⁹

Indeed the discussions in Paris of a peace plan in December 1935 were to provide the context to a lengthy statement by Noel-Baker about the legality and morality of the Abyssinian crisis. What is clear from his analysis is that the Committee of Eighteen did not have a clear mandate for its work and that much of its deliberations were taken up with discussions about priority and procedure rather than with the substance of the crisis.⁴⁰ He was anxious to point out that the negotiations between Hoare and Laval to conclude a deal with Mussolini over the partition of Abyssinia were taking place without the approval of the League, despite British and French attempts to argue to the contrary. 'The Anglo-French manoeuvre at the Coordination Committee was a most discreditable piece of sharp practice, intended to deceive public opinion into believing that the League had somehow approved of the Anglo-French haggling with the aggressor which was always as wrong in principle as it has proved disastrous in

practice.⁴¹ The British and French were engaged in ‘an Imperialist, annexationist peace’ that was ‘a flagrant violation of Article 10 of the Covenant and which would establish the principle that treaties may be broken and war may be used as an instrument of national policy within the framework of the Covenant’.⁴² The situation was made worse because of assurances from Hoare that the British government was committed to resolving the crisis through the offices of the League. Noel-Baker’s statements on these issues, especially the idea that the war in Abyssinia was ‘Musso’s imperialist escapade’ was also partly prompted by the publication in November 1935 of *Inquest on Peace* by ‘Vigilantes’, the *nom de plume* of the League official, Konni Zilliacus.⁴³ The proposal contained in this book for a ‘discreet Anglo-French-Italian deal behind the scenes which would then be put over on the Abyssinians and subsequently presented at Geneva as a triumph for peace and conciliation’ was regarded by Noel-Baker as concrete evidence that the League needed to take stock of the principles on which it had be founded.⁴⁴

That his part in the Hoare-Laval pact effectively ruined the British Foreign Secretary’s career has been widely documented.⁴⁵ However, sight is often lost of the fact that his position was not without support, especially within the League. Paul van Zeeland, the Belgian Prime Minister, had told the Co-ordination Committee on 18 November that the efforts made by Hoare and by Laval to reach a diplomatic settlement should be given full time to take shape and that other measures that could have a negative effect on League relations with Mussolini should be shelved, at least on a semi-permanent basis. Van Zeeland was also a pragmatist. Like Hoare, he believed that the use of economic sanctions was likely to be too little too late to constrain the Duce and could have a detrimental effect on the economies of member states that agreed to be part to such a step. Importantly too, this point of view met

with the agreement of the Committee's chairman, Vasconcellos, but became overshadowed by the political fallout in London and in Paris of the pact. Noel-Baker took a different view of Hoare's actions. He believed that the Foreign Secretary had agreed to the terms of the pact because he was too impatient to see if sanctions would work.⁴⁶

Anglo-French actions had taken on a perverse, almost tragic character. The willingness to 'give in to Mussolini' was 'because the reactionary British and French Governments are more afraid of the results in Europe and Africa of defeating Mussolini and vindicating the Covenant than they are of the consequences of helping him to defeat the League'.⁴⁷ A special meeting of the League Council should be convened to save the British and French from their own cowardice and to recommend an increase rather than a decrease of pressure on the Italian dictator. The legal principals of the situation should be reaffirmed. The Italian invasion of Abyssinia was contrary to Article 10 of the Covenant and Article 2 of the Kellogg-Briand Pact. These were facts that had not changed, so it was difficult to understand why the British and French were apparently willing to ignore these facts. In particular, the League should press ahead with approving the adoption of oil sanctions.⁴⁸ Hoare's willingness to broker a deal with Laval over the future of Abyssinia provided further evidence that 'No amount of painful experience seems to correct their incorrigible belief that it is 'realistic' to disregard our treaty obligations'.⁴⁹ As a result, Hoare had 'thrust' Britain 'back into the mud of dishonour and humiliation'.⁵⁰ As things stood, not only was the League defunct and humiliated, but international diplomacy had taken a 'long step back toward the pre-war Concert of the Great Powers, and to the politics of the balance of power, alliances, and an arms race'.⁵¹ If the British and French allowed the League Covenant to wither on the vine, the people of both

countries would be resigning themselves ‘17 years after the world war to end war, to becoming cannon fodder once more, to being mere sheep led to the shambles by blind shepherds’.⁵²

The consequences to Hoare, to the British government and to Anglo-French relations of the Hoare-Laval Pact are discussed in more detail elsewhere in this volume. Hoare’s replacement at the Foreign Office, Antony Eden, was much clearer and more passionate about his support for the League.⁵³ This point was not lost on Noel-Baker. Under Eden, British League policy was now ‘pulling its socks up’, although this was likely to have a mixed effect on British public opinion.⁵⁴ On the one hand, the British people were being encouraged to support the work of the League, while at the same time asked to sanction a massive programme of rearmament. The political and diplomatic fallout from such a paradox could be avoided if the British government concluded an arbitration and mutual assistance treaty with all the European Members of the League whereby the aggressor would be designated by the Council (without votes of the Parties).⁵⁵ In the context of the present crisis, this would come into force only against Italy, who would also fall foul of Articles 10 and 16 of the Covenant. In that context, Britain and France should use their League deliberations to consider the adoption of military sanctions and collective defence rather than the wasted opportunity of oil sanctions.⁵⁶ But he was not optimistic that such a strategy would become a reality.

And on this point, Noel-Baker was correct. Under Eden’s stewardship, and working in conjunction with Laval’s successor at the Quai d’Orsay, Pierre Étienne Flandin, Anglo-French League policy towards the crisis became less linear. It became less dependent on statements of outrage and utterances about the imposition of sanctions, and became more multi-dimensional. Eden’s approach was to add teeth to

the existing League strategy and to press strongly for the imposition of oil sanctions. For that he received Cabinet support on 26 February 1936.⁵⁷ Flandin, in contrast, adopted a much less hawkish approach, requesting that Eden hold fire until the next meeting of the Committee of Eighteen on 2 March, thus giving time for a further plea to be made to Mussolini to order a ceasefire.⁵⁸ If no undertaking was received by the time the Committee of Eighteen met, then the French government would agree to the adoption of oil sanctions.⁵⁹

Noel-Baker was sceptical that Mussolini would take advantage of Flandin's offer and believed that the British government should take a lead in imposing oil sanctions not least in recognition of the already strong British military presence in the eastern Mediterranean.⁶⁰ A weak political response in London or Geneva would undermine the credibility of any threat or deployment of British military action that may be necessary. But it also fell to Britain to convince the French and other key European powers that the League as a means of arbitrating international disputes was worth defending. As he told Viscount Cecil of Chelwood: 'It therefore plainly rests in the hands of the British Govt. to decide what the future will be: whether we shall go towards peace through the League, or towards destruction through the old diplomacy.'⁶¹ Ultimately, the reforms of the League may be necessary to enable a tougher and more sustained response to be made to the foreign policy aspirations of the fascist dictators, but the present time was not the time to propose them. In a letter to Viscount Cecil's brother, Hugh, at the end of 1935, Noel-Baker had outlined how he believed the League should face the crisis in Abyssinia. The first mistake, he argued, was to negotiate with an aggressor, and he cited as a precedent Austen Chamberlain's unwillingness in 1925 to listen to Greek claims to Bulgarian territory until Greek forces had retreated from Bulgarian soil.⁶² That strategy had worked;

there was little reason to believe that a similar approach would not work with Mussolini.⁶³ What is more, it was important for the British government to take decisive action through the League against the Italian dictator because if no such action was taken, it could lead to a resurgence of anti Anglo-French African nationalism that could affect the general strategic interests of those countries in the region.⁶⁴

However, British and French plans became overtaken by events as the Abyssinian Emperor, Haile Selassie, agreed to open peace negotiations with the Italians on 5 March. But of almost greater significance was Hitler's decision to begin the remilitarisation of the Rhineland two days later, thus deflecting Anglo-French attention away from Mussolini's activities in Abyssinia. With two of the Locarno powers now in breach of the 1925 pact at the same time, both Flandin and Eden became increasingly preoccupied with devising a united Anglo-French stand over the unfolding crisis in the Rhineland.⁶⁵ Evidence of this was Eden's wavering support for the use of sanctions in the early summer of 1936. Just four months after he had received hard-won agreement from the Cabinet to offer British support for the imposition of sanctions, Eden was urging the same body to agree to their abandonment. On 4 July, forty-four delegates from the sanctionist states approved the termination of the programme. Forty-eight hours later, the Co-ordination Committee met and decided that sanctions should be ended on 15 July. This was, for Noel-Baker, an act of British betrayal of the League.⁶⁶ The British press viewed the League's decision somewhat differently. *The Morning Post* and *The Daily Mail* believed that any attempt by the League to influence the outcome of the Abyssinian crisis was contrary to the 'facts of international life' where 'the survival of the fittest in the jungle' was inevitable and that 'any idea of supranational law' was 'unrealistic and wrong headed'.⁶⁷ A leader

on 4 July decried the decision to impose sanctions as an attempt by the League to provoke war, rather than to limit it. It was well known that the deployment of economic sanctions either caused wars to break out or made them spread.⁶⁸

Northedge has claimed that this shift came about because Flandin and Eden believed that in the final analysis, despite all their vehement statements condemning Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia, that Italy was not as important a power to British and French interests as Germany. That was not entirely true. In January 1935, Laval had been sufficiently worried by Mussolini's increasing bellicosity to persuade the Italian dictator to withdraw his troops from their bases close to Italy's frontier with France. But be that as it may, a mutual distrust of Germany had provided the lifeblood of the Entente Cordiale since its creation in 1904. Indeed, during his speech to the League Assembly on 11 September 1935, Hoare had noted that Laval 'had the whole time been thinking of the German danger'. The much closer geographical proximity of the Rhineland crisis to Britain and France did give it a strategic immediacy that the events in Abyssinia had by this time ceased to have. Despite the presence of the Royal Navy in the eastern Mediterranean, by the spring of 1936 it was clear that for the foreseeable future at least, Mussolini's aspirations in north Africa would not directly challenge the Suez Canal or the territorial integrity of British and French mandates and colonial possessions in the region.

When the Abyssinian surrender in July 1936 came, for Noel-Baker, final evidence that the policy of collective security so fundamental to the League and the right wing nationalist ideologies of the Italian, Japanese and German dictatorships were intrinsically and irreconcilably opposing forces in international diplomacy. As he told Clement Attlee, 'These regimes are incurably, inherently and permanently hostile to everything for which the collective system stands.'⁶⁹ This schism had come

about, he was clear, because of Anglo-French indecisiveness. This vacillation had been caused by a weak National Government foreign policy instigated primarily by the Conservative members of the coalition. He urged Attlee to secure an undertaking from the Labour Party's National Executive that it would not recognise any peace agreement resulting from the end of the conflict in Abyssinia that condoned Italian aggression towards that country.⁷⁰ An alternative foreign policy strategy should be waiting ready to be implemented as soon as the British people became tired of Eden and Baldwin and replaced them with a Foreign Secretary and Premier drawn from the ranks of the Labour Party. Furthermore, that the League should be at the heart of its implementation, along with an attempt to breath fresh life in to the Entente Cordiale. The only caveat was that Ramsay MacDonald was not to be permitted a leading role on the grounds that his mental faculties were now unsound and because his policies on disarmament during the first half of the decade had hindered rather than promoted Anglo-French cooperation over the League.⁷¹ While military operations may have reached a denouement in Abyssinia, Noel-Baker's Labour-led British foreign policy would be rooted in continuing to oppose the Italian occupation through the use of sanctions. While he recognised that their applications had proved to be one of the main stumbling blocks for the maintenance of collective security, he believed that the League had few other options. Thus he would also be able to demonstrate to the League's present Conservative detractors, especially Winston Churchill and Neville Chamberlain, that it was not now defunct.⁷²

Working on his long-held premise that it was British rather than French foreign policy that gave direction to the Entente Cordiale, Noel-Baker believed that the most effective way of garnering French support for such a plan of action was not through direct British pressure on France.⁷³ Instead, as he suggested to Pierre Cot, the

support of the France's League allies among the Little Entente powers should be secured, which in turn could be used as leverage to persuade the Quai d'Orsay not to abandon the League as a diplomatic tool. In other words, the French would not be compelled to follow the British lead in coping with the aftermath of the Abyssinian peace settlement alone.⁷⁴ Noel-Baker was also aware that during 1935, the Quai d'Orsay had already looked eastwards in search of diplomatic allies. The resulting Franco-Soviet pact provided a potentially useful ideological weapon should there be further confrontation with the fascist dictators. But he also regarded Soviet willingness to form an alliance with one of the most important countries in the League as evidence that Stalin had not lost faith in that organisation.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Noel-Baker had reason to believe that that beleaguered democratic government in Spain would be in favour of continuing to impose sanctions against Italy, thereby reducing the chance of the growing nationalist movement in Spain securing support from the Duce.⁷⁶ If the campaign for the maintenance of sanctions received sufficient international support, the British government might be willing to give practical support in the forms of ammunition and money to the Abyssinians, eventually giving them the wherewithal to drive out the Italian invaders. Noel-Baker reflected: 'If...Sanctions were kept on, and the League were finally to triumph in Abyssinia, the effect would be profound.'⁷⁷

While the overwhelming consensus of opinion among international historians is that the League was a failure and that the Abyssinian crisis represented one of the final chapters in its history of slow, often indecisive and inadequate responses to the diplomatic crises of the interwar period, Noel-Baker's response to the events in north Africa between 1935-36 illustrates that that description is too two-dimensional. As already indicated, Noel-Baker was not the only supporter of the League who believed

that the way forward was for the League to reinvent itself rather than simply to surrender its remit altogether. It could be argued that it took the Second World War – both its outbreak and the thorny issue of making peace after it – to bring about this realisation. But that was simply not the case. So why then was the message of League grandees such as Noel-Baker, Viscount Cecil of Chelwood and Gilbert Murray not heeded earlier, and if it had been, would the events set in motion by Hitler’s decision to invade Poland in September 1939 have been prevented or postponed? At the time of the crisis in Abyssinia, all three men had few real opportunities to influence government policy. Cecil, as President of the League of Nations Union, was the most prominent, but despite his enthusiastic promotion of the Peace Ballot, by 1935 he was in his seventies and anxious to make way for a younger man. Murray had returned to academia and was also a septuagenarian at the start of the Abyssinian crisis, while Noel-Baker’s Labour Party formed only a minority part of the National Government. But these facts do not reveal the whole picture. By 1936, the British and French governments had not so much lost interest or faith in the League but had come to realise that it alone was unlikely to contain the territorial ambitions of the fascist dictators. Consequently, after that date, greater emphasis was placed on developing other means of deterring or preventing war – not to replace the League – but to operate in conjunction with it. The policy of appeasement pursued by the Chamberlain government between 1937 and 1939 was largely consistent with the League’s philosophy of collective security. The British and French policies of rearmament were at face value at odds with the League Covenant, but the reality was not the case. Anglo-French rearmament policies in the late 1930s were intended primarily to deter war, but if that tactic failed, would provide some means of preparedness if a conflict broke out. This strategy also indicated that the British and

French governments recognised the validity of the argument put forward by Noel-Baker and other supporters of the League about providing a stronger means of enforcing its decisions. Of course the League failed to prevent the outbreak of war in 1939, but this point needs to be viewed in the wider diplomatic context of a much more multi-stranded approach to containing Hitler and Mussolini. Ultimately, the best traditions of the League, backed up with its own means of enforcing its decisions with military force emerged after the Second World War as the United Nations. That organisation too has, of course, had a chequered history, but its reputation has been treated more kindly by scholars and commentators on international affairs than Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. This is in no small part due to the vision – not idealistic but pragmatic – of Noel-Baker, Cecil and Murray during and after the Abyssinian Crisis.

Notes.

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- ¹ See Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, *All the Way* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949) and his history of the League of Nations, *The Great Experiment* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1941).
- ² The only biography of Noel-Baker is D. J. Whittaker, *Fighter for peace: Philip Noel-Baker, 1889–1982* (York: Sessions, 1989). Other sources include: M. Jones, *A Radical Life: the Biography of Megan Lloyd George, 1902–1966* (London: Hutchinson, 1991); B. Pimlott (ed.), *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton, 1918–1940* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986) and H. Dalton, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs, 1931–1945* (London: Muller, 1957).
- ³ P. Noel-Baker, *The Private Manufacture of Armaments* (London: Gollancz, 1936).

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- ⁴ This is the argument put forward in the best biography of Murray, D. Wilson, *Gilbert Murray OM* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).
- ⁵ Cf. J. Barros, *Betrayal from Within. Joseph Avenol, Secretary-General of the League of Nations, 1933-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), pp. 53-145.
- ⁶ Whittaker, *Fighter for Peace*. Whittaker only devotes five pages to Noel-Baker's views on the Abyssinian crisis, pp. 143-8.
- ⁷ F.P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations*, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- ⁸ F.S. Northedge, *A History of the League of Nations* (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 1989).
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 146-7. Although the first attempt to draw parallels between the League's treatment of the Manchurian and Abyssinian crises was made in M.-P. Lee, 'The Geneva Treatment of the Manchurian and Abyssinian Crises', London School of Economics PhD, 1946.
- ¹⁰ Earl of Avon, *Facing the Dictators* (London: Cassell, 1962), pp. 192-3.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 247.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 255.
- ¹⁴ *Rearmament and the Collective System*, undated memorandum, Churchill College Archive Centre, Noel-Baker Papers, NBKR 4/1. See also G. Bruce Strang, "'The Worst of all Worlds:': Oil Sanctions and Italy's Invasion of Abyssinia, 1935-1936', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 19, 2, 2008, pp. 210-235.
- ¹⁵ Undated Points for Debate on Peace Negotiations, undated memorandum, NBKR 4/1.

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- ¹⁶ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp. 266-7.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 260-1; c.f. J.A. Cross, *Sir Samuel Hoare: a Political Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), pp. 216-7.
- ¹⁸ Sir S. Hoare's Speech to the League Assembly, September 11, 1935, Appendix IV, *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, Second Series, Vol. XIV, pp. 784-790.
- ¹⁹ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp. 275-9.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 265.
- ²¹ Noel-Baker to Bertrand, 4 October 1935, NBKR 4/1.
- ²² American co-operation consisted primarily of the note sent by the Roosevelt administration the League Council on 26 October 1935 saying that it was willing to discourage American oil barons from trading with Mussolini. As the United States provided Italy with less than six per cent of its oil at this time, this was little more than a token gesture.
- ²³ See, for example, Z. Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History 1919-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 380-382.
- ²⁴ Noel-Baker to Bertrand, 4 October 1935, NBKR 4/1.
- ²⁵ 'Note sent to Lord Cecil on October 23rd 1935', NBKR 4/1.
- ²⁶ Noel-Baker to Cummings, 21 October 1935, NBKR 4/1.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Noel-Baker to Blum, 7 October 1935, NBKR 4/1.
- ²⁹ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp. 278-9.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 292.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 284-5.
- ³² Noel-Baker to Pierre Cot, 23 June 1936, NBKR 4/1.

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- 33 See for example, Record of a conversation with Blum, 9 May 1936, NBKR
4/1.
- 34 Letter to *The Times*, 16 April 1936, NBKR 4/1.
- 35 Noel-Baker to Blum, 18 April 1936, NBKR 4/1.
- 36 Quoted in D. Waley, *British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War 1935-
1936* (London: Temple Smith, 1975), p. 24.
- 37 Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp. 292-3.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 308.
- 39 Noel-Baker to Martin, 7 December 1935, NBKR 4/1.
- 40 Undated Points for Debate on Peace Negotiations, NBKR 4/1.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Gilbert Murray to Cecil, 6 November 1935, Gilbert Murray Papers, Bodleian
library.
- 44 Whittaker, *Fighter for Peace*, p. 143.
- 45 See Cross, *Sir Samuel Hoare*, pp. 193-265.
- 46 Undated Points for Debate on Peace Negotiations, NBKR 4/1.
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp. 316-7.
- 54 Noel-Baker to Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, 15 December 1935, NBKR 4/1.

55 Noel-Baker to Henry Cummings, 12 February 1936, NBKR 4/1.

56 *Ibid.*

57 Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, p. 327.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 328.

59 Noel-Baker to Henry Cummings, 12 February 1936, NBKR 4/1.

60 *Ibid.*, NBKR 4/1.

61 Noel-Baker to Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, 15 December 1935, NBKR 4/1.

62 See Z. Steiner, *The Lights that Failed*, p. 358.

63 Noel-Baker to Hugh Cecil, 16 December 1935, NBKR 4/1.

64 Noel-Baker to Hugh Cecil, 12 December 1935, NBKR 4/1.

65 Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp. 330-31.

66 Noel-Baker to Clement Attlee, 6 June 1936, NBKR 4/1.

67 Waley, *British Public Opinion*, p. 22.

68 *The Morning Post*, 4 July 1936, p. 5. See also ‘Abyssinia, Italy and the League of Nations’, *British-Italian Bulletin*, 1936.

69 Noel-Baker to Clement Attlee, 6 June 1936, NBKR 4/1.

70 *Ibid.*

71 Noel-Baker to Pierre Cot, 23 June 1936, NBKR 4/1.

72 *Ibid.*

73 Noel-Baker’s views about Britain as the ‘senior partner’ in the Entente Cordiale can be found in his letter to *The Times*, 8 May 1936, NBKR 4/1.

74 Noel-Baker to Pierre Cot, 23 June 1936, NBKR 4/1.

75 Noel-Baker to Walter, 1 May 1936, NBKR 4/1.

76 *Ibid.*

77 Noel-Baker to Rietti, 6 May 1936, NBKR 4/1.