

STEFAN HELL, *Der Mandschurei Konflikt. Japan, China und der Völkerbund 1931 bis 1933*. Tübingen: Universitas Verlag, 1999, 285 Seiten, EUR 25.-, ISBN 3-924898-25-1

Stefan Hell has undertaken the task of analysing the role of the League of Nations in the serious conflict of Japan vs. China. This conflict, together with the conquest of Ethiopia by Italy and the forthcoming power play by Hitler, led to the cessation of the League's activities.

The study is more than just an analysis of a conflict. It shows prerequisites for, and mechanisms of, peace keeping and peace restoring.

The Paris Peace Conference in 1919 determined the foundation of the League of Nations. From the very beginning the League was hampered by a serious one-sidedness: it consisted mainly of European members. The only non-European power was Japan. The USA did not join for isolationist reasons and the Soviet Union absented for ideological reasons.

The primary roles of the League were peaceful solution of conflicts, enforcement of arms limitations and supervision of the Versailles Peace Treaty.

In the Manchuria conflict, the League's role was threefold:

1. Development of its own joint policy
2. Stage for the Western states
3. Stage for Japan and China

Stefan Hell detects three dimensions in the conflict:

Firstly: between Japan and China.

Secondly: China, by invoking the League's collective safety system, brought the conflict to an international level, the theatre of which was the Geneva headquarters and the national governments of the member states.

Thirdly: The members of the League.

Although the USA was not a member of the League, the policy was largely determined in the triangle Geneva-Washington-London.

Stefan Hell attributes the failure of the League to achieve a peaceful solution in the Manchurian conflict to institutional weaknesses of the League's covenants and the lack of determination by the powerful members to take actions against Japan. They were plagued by economic, social and political problems and were well aware of their lack of real power of intervention. Rather than strengthening the League, the members were concerned about their own interests, one of them being the anxiety not to put their colonies at risk. To

top all this: the Powers were ignorant of the fundamental changes that were taking place in Japan.

In spite of the League's weak points, in the first decade of its existence it was able to achieve the peaceful solution of 25 international conflicts, amongst which were a threatening war between Greece and Bulgaria and an explosive situation between Italy and Greece. All these conflicts were within Europe. The Manchuria conflict was the first case overseas.

Political and economic situation in 1931:

China:

China had become a republic in 1912. It was in a state of constantly changing governments and civil wars. From the 1920's, the communist party emerged as a new political power. Manchuria, ruled by local warlords, was almost totally beyond the control of the national government. In Shanghai there were British, Japanese, French, Italian and US extraterritorial sectors. China only played a very minor role on the international scene, having a low international reputation.

Japan:

Through its victory over Russia in 1905, Japan acquired major rights in Southern Manchuria and by siding with the Allies in the 1914-1918 war, Japan had become a major international player. Japan dominated the Far Eastern region and was elected a standing member on the board of the League of Nations. Japan's international reputation was high. In the 1920's the internal political situation started changing, the economic slump of 1931 radicalising national groups. Manchuria became a focus of Japanese interests, spearheaded by nationalist military forces.

Western main powers:

The US Government considered the Far Eastern market as economically important, the emphasis being laid not on China, but on Japan, which was on one side a bulwark against the Soviet expansion in Asia, on the other side a competitor for power in the Pacific. Great Britain persisted with the idea of being a World Power, without disposing of the necessary means to back that pretension.

The first incident took place in the night of Sept. 18 to 19 near Mukden and is therefore called the "Mukden-incident". It was brought to the notice of the League on Sept. 19 and marks the beginning of its involvement. Stefan Hell describes what follows as the six

phases: three phases of hectic activity and significant events, and three phases of confidence, passivity or Japanese concessions. The main characteristics of these six phases are:

1. What began as a local conflict, declared by Japan as a matter which would be solved soon, gradually evolved to a full-scale occupation of Manchuria. It was not the Japanese Government which played the leading role, but the military in Manchuria. They left the task of international window dressing to the government. In the end, the civil government was replaced by a radical nationalist military government.
2. The League and the Western Powers first tried to mediate. When it became obvious that no result was achieved, and being short of reliable information, it was decided on Dec. 10, 1931, to despatch a fact-finding commission to Manchuria. It was headed by Lord Lytton and left for Manchuria, via USA and Japan, on Feb. 2nd, 1932. Its report was published in Geneva and Washington on Oct. 2nd, 1932, 10 months after the decision to set up a commission had been taken.
3. In the meantime the Japanese forces had occupied a large part of Manchuria and set up the puppet state of Manchukuo. Pending outcome of the Lytton Report, the Western Powers did not wish to take any sanctions against Japan.
4. The call in the report for Japan to withdraw all forces from Manchuria and the heated discussions, in which small countries played a very active role, culminated with Japan quitting the League on Feb. 24, 1933.

Stefan Hell's book provides an excellent insight into largely unknown details. It is also a testimony to how important it is to include all states into an international security system, backed by real means of intervention. The literature quoted is impressive. The appendix includes a map of Manchuria and Shanghai in 1932, extracts of important covenants of the League of Nations of 1919, the Briand-Kellog Pact of 1928, the Washington Nine-Power Agreement on Principles relating to China of 1922 and resolutions of the League of Nations regarding the Manchuria conflict.

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