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Conservative peer and historian

Ruth Henig has produced an invaluable and excellent reassessment of the positive legacy of the League of Nations

The Peace that Never Was

A History of the League of Nations

By **Ruth Henig**
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The League of Nations has had a very bad press. Conceived exactly a century ago by the victorious allies after the First World War, and established under the Versailles Treaty, it has frequently been derided for failing to achieve its principal purpose: the prevention of another world war by resolving disputes without resort to armed force.

Having played a leading role in its foundation, the United States refused to have anything further to do with it, a blow from which it never entirely recovered. Britain and France were irresolute supporters. An outstanding English civil servant who was asked to run it turned the job down, saying “the British Empire is worth a thousand Leagues of Nations”. Its lack of enthusiastic backers enabled Hitler and Mussolini to brush aside its efforts to halt their evil designs.

The success of fascist brutality in the 1930s made the league appear hopelessly ineffectual. The famous, but sometimes wayward, historian A.J.P. Taylor dismissed it as a

useless body which on the outbreak of the Second World War preferred to spend its time studying railway level crossings in Switzerland. Margaret

MacMillan, a leading authority on the period, has declared that “only a handful of eccentric historians still bother to study the League of Nations”.

There is nothing in the least eccentric about the work of

her comments on its weakness, endorsing the view that Britain and France were much to blame. She writes: “Their complete failure to agree on a common policy to deal with the aggressive approach of Mussolini and Hitler robbed the league of any remaining claim to be able to maintain international peace through collective action.”

But this excellent concise book also turns the tables on the league’s numerous critics who think it achieved absolutely nothing. They have ignored its important pioneering activities, uncon-

organisation the world had yet seen. From its substantial and well-organised headquarters housed in handsome buildings in Geneva and run by the world’s first international secretariat, it brought countries together to advance human progress in ways that had never been seriously attempted before.

The league helped co-ordinate the work of 560 international bodies. In Eastern Europe the many minority groups in newly established states ‘were protected from severe injustice and harm’ until the outbreak of war in 1939. The league’s Refugee Organisation helped hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Its

Health Organisation “worked to combat and to try to control the spread of a range of danger-

ous epidemics such as typhus, cholera, smallpox and yellow fever”, paving the way for the creation of the World Health Organization after 1945. Its Permanent Court of International Justice re-emerged after 1945 as today’s International Court of Justice.

For far too long the League of Nations has been seen in a wholly negative light. In this invaluable book, Ruth Henig redresses the balance. 🏠



“She is unsparing in her comments on its glaring faults”

connected with peace-making, in many different spheres of international life. Henig gives them the prominence they deserve for the first time, having provided a preview of her fresh approach to the subject in an enjoyable summer contribution to the popular lecture series instigated last year by the Lord Speaker.

The league was the most ambitious humanitarian

Ruth Henig, a fine academic historian from Lancaster University with several books to her credit, who has been a Labour peer since 2004 and now serves as a Deputy Speaker in the Lords. She has made a lifetime’s study of the league. She is unsparing in

