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## Leonard Woolf, the League of Nations, and Peace between the Wars<sup>i</sup>

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### Abstract

Co-founding *The Political Quarterly* was one among many of Leonard Woolf's achievements during a long career as a progressive political thinker and publicist, particularly in the field of international affairs. To mark the centenary of the publication of *International Government*, his most innovative and influential work on the subject, this article seeks to assess Woolf's contribution. It examines the Fabian background to Woolf's work, his support for and approach to the League of Nations, and his commitment to collective security as an approach to peace. Through a broader understanding of the League it argues that certain failings in the area of collective security, however profound, should not be permitted to blight an otherwise impressive intellectual legacy.

**Keywords:** League of Nations; inter-war period; peace; Woolf; collective security

The prominent Fabian and Labour Party intellectual Leonard Woolf not only co-founded the *Political Quarterly*, he edited it for almost 30 years and was one of its most frequent and insightful contributors. The publication free online of 12 of his most celebrated essays ('Leonard Woolf at the *Political Quarterly*' 25 November 2014) brings Woolf's insight, along with the humour and humanity which he brought

to so many subjects, to a new audience. These qualities are nowhere better displayed than in the field in which he made his name, international affairs. It is 100 years since his first substantial contribution to this subject appeared in the form of two special supplements to the *New Statesman*. These later formed the kernel of his influential *International Government* (1916). Thus began Woolf's, and for all intents and purposes the Fabian Society's (some might even say Labour's), search for the foundations of a more rational international order. International affairs could not simply be left to vein and sometimes venal statesmen, or class-biased diplomats, or hide-bound generals and other 'men of affairs'. International affairs needed to be democratised, meaning not only the practices of international affairs but the whole business of thinking about them. In the powerful Fabian slogan 'Educate, Agitate, Organise' there was no question in Woolf's mind which came first. The 'common man' with his often uncommon wisdom needed to be educated to think clearly and effectively about this seemingly new dimension to his communal life. He needed to be given the facts, the right facts, not capitalist or imperialist facts, about international life before he could take up his new role in shaping it.

Here and elsewhere Woolf presented with Webb-like certainty 'the facts' of international life: about the nature of the international system; the dynamics and direction of change; the role of ideas and institutions; the causes of war; and a whole host of other matters. In the process he forged a multi-dimensional worldview, a Fabian or welfare internationalism that challenged orthodox 'common sense' or 'realist' views. But Woolf sought to make his view coherent without substituting one set of dangerous oversimplifications for another; and he did this by resorting to a set of ideas about the relationship between national and international interests, the growth

of international government, the role the League of Nations, and the increasing importance to civilised life of peace.

On the occasion of the centenary of the publication of *International Government* this article seeks to assess Woolf's worldview, in particular his approach to the League and his commitment to collective security as an approach to peace.

### **The Fabian Background**

Until Woolf came along the only significant Fabian foray into thinking about international relations was George Bernard Shaw's *Fabianism and The Empire* (1900). For many years this was seen as the seminal Fabian document on the subject, and *International Government* merely *Fabianism and the Empire* Mk II. But, leaving aside the different empirical foci of the two works (the South African War in Shaw's case, the Great War in Woolf's), there are important differences of general interpretation between the two. One concerns nationalism. Shaw maintained that nationalism was an obsolete political doctrine. Increasingly Great Powers would act as Great Responsibilities, i.e. not in their narrow self-interests but in the interests of civilisation as a whole. Great Powers possessed great power but their true greatness resided not in the fact of their power but their capacity to do great deeds—which they increasingly would as they became permeated with Fabian ideals. For Shaw, the logical conclusion of the Fabian doctrine of the 'inevitability of gradualness' was Fabian world government. Woolf, however, was not so sure. Nationalism was still a force to be reckoned with. World government, Fabian or otherwise, was not inevitable, it might not even be desirable.

Woolf's views on nationalism are most clearly revealed in his analysis of the Versailles settlement. This he saw as Janus-faced. The horror of the 1914-1918 war produced a strong reaction against nationalism. But it also produced a deep desire for vengeance. Nationalism was a cause of the war, but also, in the creation of a patchwork of small states in eastern and southern Europe, one of its chief consequences. The Versailles conference was dominated by the nationalists, but being pragmatists they were compelled to listen to the American President and the 'cry of the people' for an 'end to war'. Thus the Wilsonian League came to be superimposed on an essentially nationalist territorial, military and economic settlement. Or as Woolf eloquently put it, the building that began as an Arc de Triomphe was hastily finished off with the 'stucco cupola of a Temple of Peace'.<sup>ii</sup> It is fair to say that Woolf's subsequent engagement with nationalism was more polemical. But his early writings show he had a subtle appreciation of the nature of the problem. Part of that problem was its psychological embeddedness. People had a habit of clinging on to old beliefs long after they had become obsolete. This was just as much a fact to be reckoned with as material obsolescence. Nationalism as a mode of economic organisation had become dysfunctional in the modern age of economic interdependence, but this did not mean it would simply wither away.

In this and in other respects *International Government* reads today like a much more modern book than its better-known predecessor. For example, if one looks at assumptions about the causes of war, *Fabianism and the Empire* is locked into what A. J. P. Taylor in *The Troublemakers* (1957) called the 'dissenting tradition' of British foreign policy. The causes of war are located wholly at the level of the state. The analysis, to use Kenneth Waltz's term in his seminal *Man, the State, and War* (1959) is entirely 'second image'. War is the result of corrupt or illegitimate

governments. It is a conspiracy of the ruling against the working class. It is the result of capitalist manipulation of the press, parliament, and the political process. It is basically a product of state manipulation and/or dysfunction. Woolf does not dismiss these factors. After all, Woolf the Fabian social investigator was also Woolf the Labour Party activist and polemicist—he rarely missed an opportunity to take a pot shot at Tories, capitalists, financiers, generals, aristocrats, and so on. But he attaches much more importance to the nature of the international system. His analysis is predominantly ‘third image’. It is lack of international organisation, or the right kind of international organisation, and perhaps the right kind of ‘international psychology’ to go with it, where the cause of war chiefly resides.

### **The League of Nations**

In the wake of some great social calamity people always search for something new. The need is as much emotional as intellectual. The recriminations which typify the early phases of a conflict begin to subside. The question becomes: what do we do now? The answer almost always given is: whatever we do we must not return to the past. The old order becomes irredeemably associated with failure. Hopes for the future become invested in ‘new orders’ however hollow they later prove to be. This was certainly true of 1919. The creation of the League of Nations was a response to an emotional as much as a political need. The lessons of Sarajevo in 1914 did not seem to have been learned by the statesmen of Versailles in 1919. National jealousy, suspicion, animosity and ambition still seemed to be the order of the day. A symbol of hope was needed. The war-weary nationalist leaders of Europe understood this as much as their idealistic American counterpart, then riding a tidal

wave of popularity in Europe if not at home. It was on this psychological foundation that the League of Nations was built. In Woolf's words 'Geneva was created as an antidote to Serajevo and Versailles'.<sup>iii</sup>

An important contribution of *International Government* was to buttress the emotional appeal of the League with some sound analysis of the evolution of international cooperation. Sharing the Fabian fear of being dismissed as 'idealistic' or 'utopian', Woolf was at pains to point out that the 'supernational authority for the prevention of war' he was proposing was not something completely new. Rather it stood in a long line of institutional development. This was the growth of international government, which had its roots in the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century, and had experienced rapid growth with the communications revolution of the nineteenth. He defined international government as 'the regulation of relations between states, nations or peoples by international agreement'<sup>iv</sup> and it took three forms. Firstly, Great Power international government. This involved the Great Powers increasingly coming together in concerts, conventions, and congresses in order to discuss and settle matters of common interest, particularly those that threatened to disturb 'the peace of Europe'. Secondly, international government through adjudication. This involved the resort by states and other international actors to judicial and quasi-judicial procedures to settle their disputes, increasingly involving awards, decisions, or rulings from courts and tribunals. Thirdly, cosmopolitan international government. This took the form of the growth of a wide range of formal and informal associations and bodies between and across states in areas such as trade, transport, postal services, the telegraph, labour organisation, public health, science, medicine, sport, and literature.<sup>v</sup>

Far from being new, therefore, a good deal of government, in the sense of what today we would call 'global governance', existed when the League of Nations came into being on 1 January 1920. And all of Woolf's three strands could be found running through the League Covenant. 'Great Power international government' was manifest in the composition and prominent role of League Council, effectively an executive council of the victorious Great Powers. 'International government through adjudication' was manifest in the heightened status given to arbitration and judicial settlement—particularly through the creation of a Permanent Court of International Justice. 'Cosmopolitan international government' was manifest in the setting up of a wide range of League committees and commissions, often comprised of experts not the usual state representatives.

In the nineteenth century the growth of international government had been largely spontaneous, part and parcel of the process of industrial modernity. With the arrival of the League the opportunity arose to put this development on a much more organised footing. This was important because a dangerous gap had opened up between the organisation of the economic and social life of the world (increasingly international, indeed cosmopolitan) and the organisation of its political life (with its attachment to the nominally sovereign and independent nation-state). This gap had become a major breeding ground for international tension. Indeed, it was the fundamental reason why the world had found itself at war in 1914, even though it was not in the true interests of any nation to fight it. Old habits die hard, especially old mental habits. While the economic, social, cultural and scientific organisation of the world had become more international, the political mindset remained narrowly patriotic. People gave their allegiance to only one unit, their nation, and they identified their interests passionately and exclusively with that unit. They failed to



notice that many avenues of life now by-passed the nation, and it was increasingly incapable of satisfying their needs. The supposedly independent nation-state was incompatible with the complex material world and the aims, desires and modes of modern life.

This is important as it betrays an understanding of the League unfamiliar to many readers today. The League is generally seen as a collective security organisation, an executive agency for the prevention of war. But for Woolf the League was not only a collective security organisation. It was not only an executive agency to be called upon in times of emergency. Rather, it was a focal point for a wide network of international cooperation and a vital source of an ingredient essential for the future peace of the world—internationalist psychology. Allied to this Woolf spoke against those who saw the League merely as an ideal, or something good for foreigners but not really necessary for ‘us’.<sup>vi</sup> These views were corrosive. The League was a practical body of working internationalism the whole point of which was to break down the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The League as constituted was not perfect, but it offered a reasonable starting-point for getting the world on a much more organised and orderly footing, confining the international anarchy of irresponsible sovereign states to the past.

### **The Failure of the League?**

Woolf along with many internationalists of his time is associated with the League and the League is associated with failure. But the question of League failure is far more complex than conventionally understood. Firstly, the League was institutionally complex. It consisted of a Council, an Assembly, a Court, and a Secretariat headed

by a Secretary-General. But it also comprised the International Labour Organisation, still going strong; commissions on minorities, mandates and disarmament; expert committees on health, finance, economics, and intellectual cooperation; and much else. Many of these bodies conducted useful work. Some of it, indeed, was groundbreaking. This was particularly the case with the economic and social work of the League as extolled in the Bruce Report of 1939. More could be said on this broad and complex matter, but the point is that failure did not extend into every corner of the League's activities, far from it.

Secondly, it should not be assumed, though it often is, that the *raison d'être* of the League was universally accepted. Different countries looked at the League in different ways. As early as 1925 the prominent international lawyer William Rappard contended in his *International Relations as Viewed from Geneva* that there were at least three Leagues. All three concerned 'security', but conceived in quite different ways. Firstly, there was the League as seen from France. This was the 'League to execute the peace treaties'. Its main job was to uphold the post-war territorial settlement. Secondly, there was the League as seen from Britain. This was the 'League to outlaw war'. Its main job was to ensure disputes between states were settled peacefully. It was less concerned with the territorial outcome of the war than that there should not be another. Finally, there was the League as seen by its poorer and/or weaker members. This was the 'League to promote international cooperation'. Its concern was not so much the political settlement of Europe as worldwide social and economic development. Rappard's 'three Leagues' was an early expression of the modern constructivist view that institutions are not monolithic but malleable structures constantly in the process of being made and remade. Beyond its physical manifestation in the Palais des Nations in Geneva the League consisted of a fairly

flexible set of rules, principles and procedures. It was up to its members to decide what to do with them. The League was what its member-states made of it; and different states tried to make of it different things.

Thirdly, overlapping with these three conceptions of the League can be found vying for attention four general philosophical positions. The first and most famous is Wilsonian internationalism. In the spirit of President Wilson's Fourteen Points this position stressed national self-determination, free trade, open diplomacy, and the role of world public opinion. It viewed the League as an agency for realising the President's liberal democratic agenda: making the world safe for democracy, but also capitalism. The second was realism—or what came to be known as realism after 1945. According to this position the League was an instrument of power, in particular of Great Power. It did not represent a break with the past but a continuation of power politics by other means; either that or the latest fig leaf to cover the naked pursuit of power that characterised international life. The third was ameliorism. The League did not represent a break with the past but it did provide new means of modifying conventional habits and practices. In the wake of a calamitous war the League embodied the felt need of the world's statesmen for new channels of communication, new sources of information, and new means of dispute resolution. The League did not replace power politics but sought to contain it. Finally there was the progressive internationalist position. This was the one that Woolf identified with and, indeed, helped to create. The League was not perfect but it represented the beginning of something new, a new system of pacific internationalism. The League was not merely a new diplomatic tool (as conceived by ameliorists) but, in Smuts' words, 'an ever visible, living, working organ of the polity of civilisation'.<sup>vii</sup>

## **Collective Security**

This brief sketch suffices to show that that the League was a house with many mansions. Its reputation as a blanket failure is far from deserved. Any sober assessment requires, at a minimum, that the different roles and functions of the League's various agencies be taken into account—along with the many different expectations that this first experiment in universal political organisation generated. Yet even if we restrict ourselves to a narrow interpretation of the League, i.e. the League as a collective security organisation, the question of its failure is not straightforward. This is because the conception of collective security that can be found in the Covenant is far from pure, and subsequent practice (e.g. the 1925 Locarno Treaties) magnified that fact (if the old, unstable balance of power had been superseded by the League why was Locarno, with its system of mutual guarantees, necessary?)

Collective security as all professional students of the subject now know is a complex matter but it can be said to rest on four precepts. Firstly, the indivisibility of peace. This is the idea that a breach of the peace anywhere is a breach of the peace everywhere. Aggression is a threat not to this or that nation but to all nations. Secondly, the automaticity of sanctions. The response to aggression must not be discretionary. All nations have a duty respond to it wherever and whenever it occurs. A debate can be had on operational details but a broadly predetermined and automatic response there must be. Thirdly, the rejection of neutrality. This follows from the indivisibility of peace. Aggression against any state is aggression against international society as a whole. Therefore neutrality by definition is impossible.

Fourthly, the collective organisation of force. Some means of collectively organising the ultimate response, if lesser measures fail, is required. Potential aggressors must know that their transgressions will be met ultimately by the force of international society as a whole. Otherwise its deterrent effect will be limited.<sup>viii</sup>

Either formally or in practice the League fell short of all four of these precepts. The first precept was compromised by Article 21 of the Covenant which upheld the Monroe doctrine and the special rights of the US in the Americas. The second precept was compromised by Article 16 under which military sanctions remained discretionary. The third precept was compromised by permitting neutral states, e.g. Sweden and Ireland, to join the League without having to abandon their neutral status, and by the decision to base the League in the most famous neutral state of all, Switzerland. The fourth precept was not so much compromised as shelved. A duty was placed on the League Council to 'recommend' what military, naval and air force members should 'severally contribute to the armed forces to be used to protect the covenants of the League' (Article 16). But even if the Council did so recommend there was never any suggestion that the League members had any obligation to accept it. The use of force remained a sovereign prerogative. No serious attempt was made to dissolve it.

The system of collective security of the League, therefore, was heavily compromised from the start. The old system of what Woolf and others decried as 'sovereign irresponsibility' was far from absent. The principle of consent remained more or less intact. Neutrality and alliances, staples of the old order, were not abolished. The practice of balancing power continued, albeit inconsistently due to official ambivalence and public disapprobation. There is a sense therefore that what failed in Manchuria, Abyssinia, and elsewhere in the 1930s, was not collective

security but the nearest the statesmen of the day, in Paris, could get to it. The clever and pious wording of the Covenant, along with subsequent official declarations and pronouncements, created the impression that they got nearer to it than they ever in fact did.

This point established we can now consider Woolf's particular take on the League and its system, however imperfect, of collective security.

### **Woolf and Collective Security**

Woolf provides a fascinating case of the middle progressive internationalists got into over collective security in the 1930s. On the one hand their principled attachment to it meant that they resisted the temptations of appeasement. They therefore looked rather good once appeasement was abandoned with the annexation of rump-Czechoslovakia in March 1939. On the other hand, however, the depth of their understanding of the requirements of a proper system of collective security can be questioned. In addition, while the deep desire for peace of many appeasers blinded them to the reality of the Nazi threat, it can also be asked whether the deep desire for peace of many 'collectivists' blinded them to just how hostile the international environment was to a collective approach to security in the 1930s.

To his credit Woolf recognised that an effective system of collective security required, as he later put it, 'effective control of international force adequate to meet the threat of national force, international power to prevent the anarchic use of national power'.<sup>ix</sup> He rejected the idea of a permanent international police force as extolled most ardently by Lord Davies but felt that some kind of international

authority was needed with 'control of sufficient armed forces'. How this international authority or 'central world authority' as he sometimes called it differed from an international police force he did not specify. He repeatedly asserted that a precondition of collective or pooled security was national disarmament. He never clarified, however, whether national disarmament meant what later became known as 'general and complete disarmament' or simply a lower level of national armament than currently existed. The difference between the two is potentially vast. In addition, if he did mean general and complete disarmament, or something approaching it, he never explained how 'the common obligation to resist an aggressor' could be met in a disarmed world. If he did not mean general and complete disarmament he never set out what his optimum level of national disarmament would be. He was attracted by the formula of the League Covenant which called for 'the reduction in national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety, and the enforcement by common action of international obligations' (Article 8). But along with fellow progressive internationalists he never quite appreciated the cleverness of this formula. According to it the level of armaments required could be high, it could be low. One gets no guide from the Covenant, nor for that matter from Leonard Woolf. As C. A. W. Manning wryly observed about the Covenant 'while it says very much, it says very much less than it seems to'—an observation that could equally be applied to the UN Charter.<sup>x</sup>

In common with other League internationalists it seems to be the case with Woolf that something magical happens to defence or security once the word 'collective' is put in front of it. The problem with *national* defence and national armament is that it triggers power competition, arms racing, and perhaps a pre-

emptive war. But what stops *collective* defence and collective armament doing the same? Woolf never got round to asking this vital question.

In the early 1930s, much again to his credit, Woolf called on Britain to pursue a 'more militant policy'. Rather than dallying with the fascist powers, and bending over backwards to keep them in the League, Woolf wanted Britain to confront them. In common with a small number of courageous internationalists such as Norman Angell, and one or two courageous nationalists such as Winston Churchill, he wanted the League to become 'an instrument against Fascist militarism'. A League 'purged of militarist and Fascist states' would, he declared, be a 'much stronger instrument of peace than the half-sham League we have today'.<sup>xi</sup> Yet Woolf, unlike Churchill, stopped short of calling this League an 'alliance', a concept he continued to denounce. He stopped short of admitting that a 'more militant policy' might bring nearer the very thing the League and collective security were designed to avoid—war.

War was indeed a problem for Woolf—not only the phenomenon but the very word. When talking of collective military action he talks of 'sanctions', 'supporting the victims of aggression', 'standing by the side of victims of aggression', and 'fulfilling obligations under the Covenant'. But he never uses the word 'war'. National violence was war but League or collective violence was somehow something else. The reason for this is partly psychological partly semantic. Woolf had made up his mind that war was 'vile', 'evil', 'senseless', 'barbarous' and 'bestial'. He therefore could not bring himself to the realisation that something good like the League might need it for its success. He was quick to attack pacifists for not understanding the implications of the collective security obligations under the League.<sup>xii</sup> But he failed to appreciate the full implications himself. Or at least he understood them but could not accept them.



This it seems to me as an object lesson to those on the Left, and progressives more generally, when it comes to foreign and defence policy. There has been insufficient scrutiny of words. Nicer sounding words do not amount to a better policy. What the words may mean in practice needs very careful scrutiny. 'Collective action', 'collective defence', 'collective enforcement', 'military sanctions', 'military intervention' all mean war—or at least the willingness to use it as an instrument of policy. By virtue of war being collectively waged one hopes for a better outcome. But there are no guarantees, and the activity itself remains essentially the same with all its unpredictability, vileness, and barbarity—a quality of war Woolf well understood.

### **Woolf, International Cooperation and Peace**

It was paradoxically Woolf's deep understanding of the nature of war, particularly modern war, which prevented him from acquiring a deeper understanding of the requirements of collective security. War in the past was bad enough, but modern war—war fought between highly organised, industrialised, nationalistic states possessing ever-more deadly weapons—was of an entirely different order. It had to be avoided at all costs. But did not Article 16 call on states to use war as the ultimate 'sanction' against 'aggressive' war? In any normal sense it did, but the vocabulary of collective security as it developed after 1919 provided many on the centre-left including Woolf with a means of evading this reality. It was as if the vocabulary itself provided a prophylactic against war. If not quite having a stupefying effect, it provided a means by which defenders of the League could sound tough while avoiding the tough decisions that any effective system of collective security must entail.

Woolf's record in the area of collective security, however, should not blight his broader contribution to thinking about international cooperation and peace. While not a political thinker of the first rank—he never quite managed to produce the major treatise that is a requirement for this status, though *International Government* comes close—he nonetheless made an important and distinctive contribution. He was an early and imaginative thinker on what today we would call 'global governance'. He was a forceful and persistent critic of fatalism and determinism in politics. He showed that war was man made, and therefore could be man un-made. He showed that the international system was not immutable; progressive change was possible in international relations and a good deal of it had already occurred in the form of 'every-day internationalism'. Perhaps his most significant contribution, however, was to break down the dichotomy, which lamentably still does the rounds today, between idealism and realism in world politics. Woolf rightly insisted that having ideals does not necessarily make one an idealist, any more than not having ideals makes one a realist. Not all ideals are impractical, and the pursuit of ideals whether good or bad—and there were plenty of bad ones around in the 1930s—is very much a part of the landscape of international politics. In a sense Woolf's career as a writer and publicist on international relations was defined by the search for practical ideals. This is the reason why there is more interest in him and his work, along with that of other early twentieth-century progressive internationalists, now than there was twenty or thirty years ago. The international system is not as fluid as progressive internationalists assume, nor as tractable as they hope, but the years since Woolf died in 1969 amply demonstrate that constructive change can and does take place in international relations, however difficult it is to achieve and sustain.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> This is a revised version of the keynote lecture delivered at the annual Leonard Woolf Society Symposium, The Keep, Brighton, 24 May 2014.

<sup>ii</sup> Leonard Woolf, 'From Serajevo to Geneva', *Political Quarterly*, 1 (2) April 1930, p.190.

<sup>iii</sup> Woolf, 'From Serajevo to Geneva', p.191.

<sup>iv</sup> Leonard Woolf, *International Government: Two Reports* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1916), p. 90.

<sup>v</sup> Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf: A Study in Twentieth Century Idealism* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 23-51.

<sup>vi</sup> Leonard Woolf, 'The Ideal of the League Remains', *Political Quarterly*, 7 (3) July-September 1936.

<sup>vii</sup> Quoted in Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 40-41.

<sup>viii</sup> See Inis L. Claude, *Swords into Plowshares: the Problems and Progress of International Organization* (London: University of London press, 1965), pp. 223-60; Andrew Hurrell, 'Collective Security and International Order Revisited', *International Relations*, 11 (1) 1992.

<sup>ix</sup> Leonard Woolf, *The International Post-War Settlement* (London: Fabian Research Bureau, 1944), pp. 8-9.

<sup>x</sup> C. A. W. Manning, 'The "Failure" of the League of Nations', in C. A. Cosgrove and K. J. Twitchett (eds.), *The New International Actors: The United Nations and the European Economic Community* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 107.

<sup>xi</sup> Leonard Woolf, 'Labour's Foreign Policy', *Political Quarterly*, 4 (4) October-December 1933, pp. 510-12, 523-24.

<sup>xii</sup> See e.g. Leonard Woolf, 'From Geneva to the Next War', *Political Quarterly*, 4 (1) January-March 1933, pp. 41-42; 'Arms and Peace', *Political Quarterly*, 8 (1) January-March 1937, pp. 27-35.